

Review - The Shadow War

Written by Artem Patalakh

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ARTEM PATALAKH, JUN 4 2020

The Shadow War: Inside Russia's and China's Secret Operations to Defeat America

By Jim Sciutto

Harper-Collins, 2019

What hidden actions do Moscow and Beijing take to challenge the West? What is peculiar about their strategies in this confrontation? Are the US responses to their attacks adequate? Prominent CNN journalist Jim Sciutto's recent *The Shadow War: Inside Russia's and China's Secret Operations to Defeat America* seeks to cast some light upon these questions. The author believes that in recent decades, Russia and China have been waging a 'shadow war' on the US and its allies. What distinguishes this 'shadow war' from a regular war is that it is fought tacitly, with the use of mostly non-military means and often with no acknowledgement of offensive actions on the part of their inspirers and doers.

Sciutto examines seven cases exposing this confrontation. The first two concern cyberattacks, namely the 2007 Russian DDoS attack on Estonian websites and Chinese hackers' theft of data on cutting-edge US military aircraft. The next two cases regard Russian and Chinese annexionist policies in Ukraine and the South China Sea respectively. The author ascribes these two cases to the 'shadow' war since the Kremlin refuses to recognize its military presence in Ukraine and assume responsibility for downing a Malaysian passenger plane in July 2014, while China continues militarizing its artificial islands in the South China Sea despite having explicitly promised not to. The book's other cases pertain to the emergence of Russian and Chinese offensive space weapons (satellites), the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 US presidential elections and the increasing worldwide presence of Russian and Chinese submarines.

Having analyzed these cases, Sciutto concludes there exist some factors which evidently weaken the ability of the US and its allies to fight the shadow war. Remarkably, those factors have to do not so much with these states' technological capacities as to other areas. Among them, the author notes the extension of interstate confrontation to new spheres, a lack of clear rules of the game in world politics (akin to those that regulated the Cold War), the openness of Western countries' societies, which makes them vulnerable to external interferences etc. Pondering how the US can improve its position, Sciutto gives nine suggestions, inviting US decision-makers to strengthen the country's defensive and offensive capacities, better analyze its adversaries, support its allies and seek establishing more distinct rules of the game in world politics.

The Shadow War's aforesaid contents may look trivial and somewhat insubstantial. It might also seem queer that this review relates to a book written not by a researcher, but a journalist, even if well-known and well-reputed. Yet, the book's strengths concern precisely the aspects that would likely be feebler were it an academic study, and these aspects are not limited to Sciutto's lively writing style. First and foremost, the book has greatly benefited from the first-hand, first-class insight into the considered events, which the author obtained from key decision-makers thanks to his high status as CNN's Chief National Security Correspondent. *The Shadow War's* impressive acknowledgements section includes the current and former heads of various US organs, including NSA, CIA, FBI, Department of Defense etc. as well as some senior foreign officials, from incumbent Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid to former MI6 chief John Scarlett.

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Second, the author chooses not to emotionally distance himself from the events he portrays. Contrariwise, opting for a practice-driven rather than a purely descriptive approach, Sciutto actively involves himself in the facts he presents and explicitly expresses his own disquietude about the growing influence of Russia and China. Some may view this as a shortcoming, however, in this particular case, the author's ideas are not mere journalistic ruminations, but reflect the thoughts of highly experienced professionals. And in many cases, the emotional input of the author and his interviewees positively reinforces the book's arguments. Estonian officials' memories of the 2007 cyberattack, the author's own impressions of a freedom-of-navigation operation over the South China Sea, the US ambassador's recollections of the 2014 events in Ukraine—these and other similar parts of the book do a good job of enabling the reader to keenly feel the experience of the people affected by Russian and Chinese confrontational actions.

Another coup of the author concerns case selection. The cases considered embrace diverse areas, from cyber espionage to annexation of territories, so even those well aware of the Russia-US and China-US confrontations are likely to discover some previously unfamiliar aspects of these processes. Furthermore, the fact that the cases related to China alternate with those describing Russia helps one collate the peculiarities of the two countries' strategies, even if the author himself does not explicitly declare this intention. Moscow is shown as generally ambitious and assertive, yet, frequently uncaredful and driven tactically, by short-term objectives. Against this backdrop, Beijing looks more strategically oriented, aiming to dominate the world in the future. At present, China is delicate and insidious, able to accomplish its goals relatively quietly, at the same time deriving the maximum benefit possible.

There are, however, some drawbacks in the author's presentation of arguments. First, albeit overall informative and interest-piquing, the book often skips dwelling on the details of the secret operations it describes, even when those details pertain to the crux of the issue. For example, the author repeatedly states that not only the cyberattack on Estonian websites, but also the street protests of Estonian Russians in May 2007 were arranged by Moscow, yet, the latter statement remains practically unsubstantiated. Similarly, although the book primarily focuses on secret operations, as its title suggests, the chapter on Ukraine oddly makes a very short mention of Moscow's "little green men" operation in Crimea, although, to date, this was certainly the Kremlin's principal and most successful secret operation in Ukraine.

Second, when formulating his arguments, Sciutto gives too much prominence to the US and its interests, although the issues he raises are topical for all Western countries—let alone the fact that the book is acquirable worldwide, so its potential readers are not solely US citizens. For instance, while describing China's growing occupation of the South China Sea, the author repeatedly highlights that what poses a problem is that the afflicted countries are *US allies*. Likewise, while Sciutto's outline of the possible destructive implications of Russian and Chinese offensive satellites for the *US* is vivid and elaborate, he hardly says a word about such implications for *other countries*. Such presentation of facts is likely to put off the book's non-US readers, even those who fully share the author's vision of the danger of Russian and Chinese secret operations.

Third, the cases are presented unevenly, and this seems to mirror not merely the objective asymmetry of the issues at play, but also the fact that on some cases the author has collected insufficient or faint evidence. Indeed, whereas the cyber espionage of Chinese hackers enjoys a detailed description, the chapter on submarines mostly depicts the capabilities of US submarines, saying self-confessedly little about the adversaries' operations—in particular, about China, to which less than a page is devoted in that chapter. In general, the chapters on satellites and submarines leave a relatively weaker impression. This is partly because they are dedicated to spheres in which no real 'battle' has taken place yet and hence, the dangers they describe are still potential rather than already actualized. Yet, another reason is that in those chapters, Sciutto primarily draws on—perhaps, well-reasoned, but still—*speculations* rather than proven *facts*, leaving the reader uncertain as to whether what he/she reads about concerns truly *illegal* secret operations or a *regular* geopolitical competition in armaments and technology.

Last, the book certainly lacks alternative opinions. In the description of practically each of the book's cases, Sciutto mentions the existence of debates among US high officials as to how to react. However, all his interviewees appear to share one general viewpoint, that is, that the US responded too weakly. In a similar vein, while strongly criticizing Trump's welcoming of WikiLeaks' publication of the emails stolen by Russian hackers in 2016, Sciutto interviews only people representing the Hillary Clinton team and nobody from Trump's campaign headquarters. The presence of

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alternative opinions, followed by the author's critical remarks, would have definitely enhanced the strength, cogency and credibility of his arguments. Despite these shortcomings, the original and interesting factual material, presented by Jim Sciutto in an enjoyable manner, makes *The Shadow War* appealing to a wide readership. General readers will prize it as a pleasant-to-read informative source about one of the timeliest issues in world affairs. Experts on the foreign policy of Russia can use insights from *The Shadow War* to draw curious parallels with China, and vice versa. Other IR researchers will find this book a thought-provoking read about the foreign policies of autocracies and revisionist states.

About the author:

Artem Patalakh holds a PhD in Political Studies from the University of Milan. He has published a number of academic articles on soft power, democracy and human rights promotion, Russian and EU foreign policies and the geopolitics of the post-Soviet space.