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# Trump and Russia

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## The Right Way to Manage Relations

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*Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Andrew S. Weiss*

**R**elations between the United States and Russia are broken, and each side has a vastly different assessment of what went wrong. U.S. officials point to the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and the bloody covert war Russian forces are waging in eastern Ukraine. They note the Kremlin's suppression of civil society at home, its reckless brandishing of nuclear weapons, and its military provocations toward U.S. allies and partners in Europe. They highlight Russia's military intervention in Syria aimed at propping up Bashar al-Assad's brutal dictatorship. And they call attention to an unprecedented attempt through a Kremlin-backed hacking and disinformation campaign to interfere with the U.S. presidential election last November.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his circle view things differently.

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In Ukraine, Moscow sees itself as merely pushing back against the relentless geopolitical expansion of the United States, NATO, and the EU. They point out that Washington and its allies have deployed troops right up to the Russian border. They claim that the United States has repeatedly intervened in Russian domestic politics and contend, falsely, that former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even incited antigovernment protests in Moscow in December 2011. And they maintain that the United States is meddling in Syria to overthrow a legitimate government, in just the latest example of its unilateral attempts to topple regimes it doesn't like.

The gap between these two narratives is dangerous. Not only do heightened tensions raise the risk of a military accident or confrontation in Europe and beyond; they are also largely a reflection of deeply entrenched resentments within the Russian national security establishment that are likely to persist well beyond the Putin era. The differences between the United States and Russia run deep, and they are not amenable to easy solutions.

The challenge facing the Trump administration is to skillfully manage, rather than permanently resolve, these tensions with Moscow. Trying to appease Putin, perhaps by making unilateral concessions, would only convince him that he is winning and encourage him to continue wrong-footing the United States and the West. But a more confrontational approach would risk generating a provocative and dangerous response from Russia. So Washington will need to chart a middle path. That means both seeking ways to cooperate with Moscow and pushing back against it without sleepwalking into a collision.

Of course, that advice presupposes a U.S. administration that views Russia the same way previous ones have: as a problematic yet important partner on discrete issues that also poses a significant national security threat. U.S. President Donald Trump, however, appears eager to jettison established bipartisan approaches to dealing with Moscow. As he wrote on Twitter in January, “Having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only ‘stupid’ people, or fools, would think that it is bad!” And for months, he mocked the U.S. intelligence community’s warnings about Russian cyberattacks aimed at interfering with the U.S. democratic process and repeatedly praised Putin’s leadership.

Such antics suggest that Trump may attempt an abrupt reconciliation with Russia that would dramatically reverse the policies of President Barack Obama. It is hard to overstate the lasting damage that such a move would do to the U.S. relationship with Europe, to the security of the continent, and to an already fraying international order.

### **PUTIN’S GAME**

Any consideration of U.S. policy toward Russia must start with a recognition of that country’s manifold weaknesses. The Russian economy may not be “in tatters,” as Obama once remarked, but the boom that allowed Putin, during his first two terms in office, to deliver steady increases in prosperity in exchange for political passivity is a distant memory. Absent major structural reforms, which Putin has refused to undertake for fear of losing control, the economy is doomed to “eternal stagnation,” as Ksenia Yudaeva, a senior Russian central bank official, put it last year.

Following Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, the regime has retooled the sources of its legitimacy. It has fostered a fortress mentality, mobilizing the public to defend Russia against foreign adversaries and mounting an unrelenting search for Western-backed fifth columnists. The apparent spur-of-the-moment decision to annex Crimea transformed the Russian domestic political landscape overnight, propelling Putin to unprecedented levels of popularity. And in Syria, the Kremlin has capitalized on its intervention to highlight Russia’s return to global prominence.

Unfortunately, tighter economic constraints are not likely to dissuade Putin from engaging in future foreign policy adventures. The collapse of oil prices that began in 2014 hit the Russian economy hard, as did the sanctions the West applied in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine that same year. Yet Putin has shown little restraint in the international arena since. His defiant approach appears to have strong support from the Russian elite, which faithfully rallies to the cause of standing up to the United States and reasserting Russia’s great-power status.

Indeed, Russia has always been much more than a mere “regional power,” as Obama once dismissed it; the country figures prominently in important issues across the globe, from the Iran nuclear program to the security of the entire transatlantic community. That will not change. But even if one accepts that Russia is a declining power, history shows that such states can cause considerable damage on their way down. And if there is one thing that can be said for certain about Putin, it is that he is a skilled and opportunistic risk taker capable of forcing others to deal with him on his own terms.



The United States must also reckon with another fundamental characteristic of Russia's foreign policy: its desire for de facto control over its neighbors' security, economic, and political orientation. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have long considered this unacceptable. Yet it constitutes one of the Russian regime's core requirements for security.

Absent an abrupt change in these fundamental realities, it will be hard to significantly improve U.S. relations with Russia. The country's intervention in Ukraine has demolished much of the post-Cold War security order and, along with it, any semblance of trust on either side. And it would be irresponsible for Washington to turn a blind eye to the Kremlin's reliance on hacking, disinformation, and Cold War-style subversion in its efforts to undermine the United States' international reputation and to meddle in democratic processes in Europe and beyond. The best course of action is for the United States to stand firm when its vital interests are threatened, to expose and counter Moscow's penchant for irregular tactics, and to carefully manage the rivalry that lies at the heart of the bilateral relationship.

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

In recent years, Russia and the West have been heading toward something that looks a lot like a second Cold War. This confrontation may lack the geopolitical and ideological scope of the first, but it still carries a high risk of actual conflict. The close encounters that NATO aircraft and warships have had with Russian jets are no accident; they are part of a deliberate Kremlin strategy to intimidate Moscow's adversaries.

For now, the Kremlin is likely to try to downplay sources of tension, setting the stage for friendly initial encounters with the new U.S. president and his team. Assuming Moscow follows that course, Washington will have to proceed with caution as Putin, the consummate deal-maker, seeks to shape the terms of a new relationship. In negotiating those terms, the Trump administration should adhere to five overarching principles.

First, it must make clear that the United States' commitment to defend its NATO allies is absolute and unconditional. To do so, the United States should bolster deterrence through an ongoing series of defense improvements and increased military deployments on the alliance's eastern flank. It should also ramp up the pressure on fellow NATO members to spend more on defense.

Second, the United States needs to steadfastly uphold the principles enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe—both of which commit Moscow to recognize existing borders and the right of all countries to choose their own allies. It may be hard to imagine a feasible scenario for returning Crimea to Ukraine, but the annexation remains a flagrant violation of international law that no country should recognize or reward. That means keeping in place the U.S. and EU sanctions that ban transactions and economic cooperation with Russian-occupied Crimea.

Third, as Washington reengages with Moscow, it must not run roughshod over Russia's neighbors. Appeasing Russia on Ukraine or caving in to its demand for a sphere of influence in its neighborhood would set a terrible precedent and undermine U.S. standing in the world. The



*Ally or adversary? Putin delivering his New Year's address in Moscow, December 31, 2016*

inherent fragility of Russia's neighbors will create many openings for future Russian meddling, so the United States and its allies will need to remain vigilant and become more deeply engaged in such a complex region.

Fourth, Washington and its partners in the EU should commit themselves to supporting Ukrainian political and economic reform through skillful diplomacy and a generous flow of resources. It will probably take a generation or longer to turn this pivotal country into a prosperous, European-style state, not least because of Russia's undisguised desire for Ukraine's reformist experiment to fail. If Ukraine receives steady Western support based on clear and achievable conditions, its success will have a lasting positive impact on Russia's trajectory by demonstrating a viable

alternative to the Kremlin's top-down approach to governance.

Fifth, as the United States attempts to support democracy in Russia and other former Soviet states, it should make a sober-minded assessment of local demand for it and the best use of limited resources. Russia's democratic deficit will hinder better relations with the West for as long as it persists. The same problem will continue to complicate U.S. ties with many of Russia's neighbors. But too often, Washington has overestimated its ability to transform these societies into functioning democracies.

In applying these principles, the United States needs to remain mindful of the risks of overreaching. That will mean making sharp distinctions between what is essential, what is desirable, and what is realistic.



## **NEEDS AND WANTS**

Improved communication belongs in the first category. In response to Russia's moves in Ukraine, the Obama administration suspended most routine channels of communication and cooperation with the Russian government and encouraged U.S. allies to follow suit. As the crisis has dragged on, it has become harder to address differences, avoid misunderstandings, and identify points of cooperation in the absence of regular interactions at various levels. The Trump administration should entertain the possibility of resuming a wide-ranging dialogue, even though the Russians may well prove as unwilling to engage in a serious give-and-take as they did during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, or may choose to use the talks solely to score political points. But even if the Kremlin isn't ready to engage forthrightly, the Trump administration should put four essential priorities above all else in its early discussions with the Russian government.

First, the Trump administration should respond to Russian meddling in the U.S. presidential election in ways that get the Russians' attention. As a parting shot, Obama imposed sanctions on Russian entities involved in the hacking and ejected 35 Russian diplomats from the United States. Yet much more needs to be done. A carefully calibrated covert response in cyberspace would send the message that the United States is prepared to pay back the Kremlin and its proxies for their unacceptable actions. Trump should also work to protect the large swaths of government and private-sector networks and infrastructure in the United States that remain highly vulnerable to cyberattacks. The lack of a

concerted response to Russia's meddling would send precisely the wrong signal, inviting further Kremlin exploits in France and Germany, which are holding their own elections this year. In the meantime, the U.S. government should explore whether it can work with major actors in the cyber-realm, such as China and Russia, to develop new rules of the road that might limit some of the most destabilizing kinds of offensive operations.

Second, the Trump administration should ensure that military-to-military channels are open and productive. Russia's provocations carry the very real risk of a military confrontation arising from a miscalculation. Washington should prioritize getting Russia to respect previously agreed-on codes of conduct for peacetime military operations, however difficult that might be. The situation is especially dangerous in the skies over Syria, where Russian pilots frequently flout a set of procedures agreed to in 2015 to avoid in-air collisions with U.S. and other jets.

Third, in Ukraine, Trump should focus on using diplomatic tools to de-escalate the military side of the conflict and breathe new life into the Minsk accords, a loose framework of security and political steps that both sides have refused to fully embrace. The existing package of U.S. and EU sanctions represents an important source of leverage over Moscow, and so it should not be reversed or scaled back in the absence of a major change in Russian behavior in Ukraine. At the same time, the United States and its EU allies must work to keep Ukraine on a reformist path by imposing strict conditions on future aid disbursements to encourage its government to fight high-level

corruption and respond to the needs of the Ukrainian people.

The fourth and final priority for the Trump administration is to remain realistic about the prospects of promoting transformational change in Russia. As the last 25 years have shown again and again, Russia resists outside efforts at modernization. In other words, the United States should not treat Russia as a project for political, social, or economic engineering.

Then there are goals that, although not essential, remain desirable. In this category should go issues on which Washington and Moscow have a good track record of cooperation thanks to overlapping, if not identical, interests. These include cooperation on preventing nuclear proliferation, reducing the threat of nuclear terrorism, and protecting the fragile environment in the Arctic. Because these issues are largely technical in nature, they do not require the time and attention of senior officials. A great deal of progress can be made at lower levels.

On more ambitious arms control efforts, however, progress will require high-level decisions that neither side is eager to make. Such is the case with resolving the impasse over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the United States claims Russia has violated, and securing further reductions in the size of both countries' strategic and tactical nuclear arsenals.

Even so, the Trump administration should keep the door open to further progress on arms control. The U.S.-Russian arms control edifice is in danger of collapsing: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe are no longer in force, the Intermediate-Range

Nuclear Forces Treaty may soon fall apart, and the New START treaty is due to expire in 2021. Neither Russia nor the United States is ready for a new arms control agreement, primarily because of conflicting agendas. Moscow wants to constrain U.S. deployments of missile defense systems and high-tech conventional weapons, while Washington wants to further reduce the number of Russian strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. But neither would be served by abandoning arms control completely. At a minimum, both would benefit from more conversations about their force structures and nuclear doctrines, with an eye toward ensuring stability, especially in crises.

#### **FACT AND FANTASY**

Of course, Washington's ability to achieve what is essential and what is desirable will be limited by what is realistic. In a perfect world, Trump would focus on keeping relations from deteriorating further. Instead, he and his team appear to be fanning expectations of a big breakthrough and a grand bargain.

Indeed, much of what Trump says he believes about Russia appears unrealistic, to put it mildly. For starters, he has made the mystifying choice to ridicule the U.S. intelligence community's finding that it was Russia that was behind the hacking of e-mails from the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign. If Trump's and his advisers' statements are to be believed, even a brazen attempt originating at the highest levels of the Russian government to undermine Americans' confidence in their country's democratic process is less important than the poor cybersecurity practices of the Democratic



National Committee and Clinton's inner circle.

Trump appears to hold an equally unrealistic view of the Ukrainian crisis, saying of Putin during the campaign, "He's not going to go into Ukraine, all right?"—even as thousands of Russian troops were already there. When asked by *The New York Times* on the eve of the election about Putin's behavior in Ukraine and Syria and the ongoing crackdown against Putin's political opponents, Michael Flynn, Trump's pick for national security adviser, called these issues "besides the point." He added, "We can't do what we want to do unless we work with Russia, period."

But as Trump will likely discover, reality has a way of interfering with attempts to transform relations with Moscow. Every U.S. president from Bill Clinton on has entered office attempting to do precisely that, and each has seen his effort fail. Clinton's endeavor to ease tensions fell apart over NATO expansion, the Balkan wars, and Russian intervention in Chechnya; George W. Bush's collapsed after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war; and Obama's ran aground in Ukraine. Each administration encountered the same obstacles: Russia's transactional approach to foreign policy, its claim to a sphere of influence, its deep insecurities about a yawning power gap between it and the United States, and its opposition to what it saw as Western encroachment. Finding common ground on these issues will be difficult.

It appears that at the core of Trump's vision for improved relations is a coalition with Russia against the Islamic State—to, in his words, "knock the hell out of ISIS." Yet such cooperation is unlikely to materialize. The Russians have shown

no interest in beating back ISIS in Syria, choosing instead to attack the main opposition forces arrayed against the Assad regime. Russia's and Iran's support for Assad may have fundamentally changed the course of the civil war in Syria, but their crude methods and disregard for civilian casualties have probably only emboldened the radical jihadists. Help from the Russian military would be a mixed blessing, at best, for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, given the pervasive lack of trust on both sides and the very real risk that sensitive intelligence and targeting information would find its way into the hands of Moscow's allies in Damascus and Tehran.

Trump has also expressed interest in developing stronger economic ties with Russia as a foundation for improved diplomatic relations, at least according to the Kremlin's summary of Putin's congratulatory call to Trump after the election. Here, too, he is likely to be disappointed. Clinton, Bush, and Obama all placed high hopes on trade as an engine of better relations with Russia. All were frustrated by the fact that the two countries are, for the most part, not natural trading partners, to say nothing of the effects of Russia's crony capitalism, weak rule of law, and predatory investment climate.

### **PROCEED WITH CAUTION**

Trump inherited a ruptured U.S.-Russian relationship, the culmination of more than 25 years of alternating hopes and disappointments. As both a candidate and president-elect, he repeatedly called for a new approach. "Why not get along with Russia?" he has asked. The answer is that at the heart of the breakdown lie disagreements over issues that each

country views as fundamental to its interests. They cannot be easily overcome with the passage of time or a summit meeting or two. Thus, the challenge for the new administration is to manage this relationship skillfully and to keep it from getting worse.

Should Trump instead attempt to cozy up to Moscow, the most likely outcome would be that Putin would pocket Washington's unilateral concessions and pursue new adventures or make demands in other areas. The resulting damage to U.S. influence and credibility in Europe and beyond would prove considerable. Already, the rules-based international order that the United States has upheld since the end of World War II is in danger of unraveling, and there is mounting concern throughout Europe, Asia, and beyond that Trump does not consider it worth preserving. What's more, there's no telling how Trump will respond if and when he has his first showdown with Putin, although his behavior toward those who cross him suggests that things would not end well.

Reduced tensions with Russia would no doubt help further many of the United States' political and security priorities. But policymakers must keep in mind that the abiding goal should be to advance U.S. interests, support U.S. allies across the world, and uphold U.S. principles—not to improve relations with Russia for their own sake. Indeed, it's possible to stand up for American interests and principles while pursuing a less volatile relationship with Russia. The Nixon administration sowed mines in a harbor in North Vietnam, a Soviet ally, while seeking *détente* with Moscow. The Reagan administration aggressively

challenged Soviet-backed regimes and groups in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America at the same time as it signed arms control agreements with Moscow.

Likewise, the Trump administration can, for example, counter Russian aggression in Ukraine while looking for ways to cooperate on efforts to keep weapons of mass destruction out of the wrong hands. Such an approach has a far greater chance of success than pure confrontation or pure concession. Russian leaders have long expressed their preference for *realpolitik*; they will respect a country that stays true to its principles, knows its interests, and understands power. 🌐



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