

**THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF US-RUSSIA RELATIONS:
THE TRANSITION FROM PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA
TO ELECT- PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP**

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In the last decade, Russia's actions showed clear signs of her aspirations to re-assert itself as the major counterpart of the United States. Russia has 'revamped its military, invaded two neighbouring countries, intervened on behalf of President Assad in Syria, and threatened NATO with nuclear saber-rattling, aerial incursions, and military exercises.' (RAND Corporation, 2016) Particularly since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine the relationship between the United States and Russia resembles that of post-Cold War. Despite the severity of the response from Europe and the United States, economic sanctions, excluded Russia from the G8 and bolstering NATO's defenses in Central Europe, Russia continues to openly challenge the United States. Hence, the question regarding the future of US-Russia relations, in light of the upcoming November elections, becomes even more important. This article will address this question by analyzing the basic tenets of the policy of the Obama Administration and the rhetoric of the President-elect towards Russia.

Why is the Issue of Russia important for the new Administration?

The history between the two countries and the aggressive policy of Russia guarantees that it will remain a major national security concern for the incoming administration. The next President of the United States will be forced to deal with Russia in the early stages of his presidency. Russia is showing clear signs of her willingness to expand its sphere of influence and challenge its neighbors in the region. Evidence of this attitude can be found in the developing crisis in Ukraine and the Russian involvement in Syria, which leaves no room to postpone discussions with Russia regarding the future of cooperation between the two major powers. Apart from Ukraine, another issue of concern is Russia's antagonistic policy against Moldova, Georgia, and other non-NATO partners.

More importantly, these developing crises between the two countries suggest that overall strategic stability with Russia may be weakening. Hence, the incoming administration 'will need to assess Russian proposals for close cooperation on counterterrorism airstrikes in Syria and ending the civil war there.'(RAND Corporation, 2016) However, these issues are not the only ones that require the attention of the new US President when dealing with Russia. According to Rand Corporation specific policy issues that need to be addressed include:

- Should the United States seek to play a more prominent role on Ukraine issues, perhaps seeking to revise the "Normandy format" whereby European allies lead negotiations with Russia over the conflict in Ukraine?
- Should the United States supply lethal weapons to Ukraine in the event the Minsk II agreement continues to falter and the conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine intensifies?
- What policy should the United States pursue regarding Georgia and Moldova? In particular, what should its policy on NATO membership for Georgia be?
- Is the NATO-Warsaw Summit pledge to deploy four battalions along the Eastern Flank sufficient to deter future threats, or does the United States need to go further and deploy additional forces? What is the appropriate U.S. force posture in Europe in general?
- What options exist for building strategic stability with Russia in the future? What are the relative roles of strategic deterrence, arms control, transparency, and other measures?
- Are the requisite elements in place for fruitful counterterrorism cooperation with Russia in Syria?

Obama Administration: From Cooperative Engagement to Power Politics.

The policy of the Obama Administration towards Russia went through two distinct phases. The first phase can be amply characterized as 'cooperative engagement' where the Obama Administration made conscious efforts for rapprochement, while the second relates mostly to power politics due to the aggressive response of the Administration to the continued aggression of Russia, which culminated with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The inauguration of the Obama Administration created high hopes for rapprochement between the two major powers. At the Munich Security Conference, US Vice President Joe Biden reaffirmed these expectations by promising closer cooperation with America's allies and re-engagement with Russia. (Rumer and Stent, April-May 2009) When Obama became President tensions between Russia and the United States have increased considerably as a result of the invasion of Georgia in August 2008. Four issues dominated the relationship between the two countries during the Obama Administration, Russia's policy towards its neighbors, missile defense, strategic challenges such as Iran, and developments inside Russia.(Kramer, 2010) Regardless, his initial efforts to reconceptualize America's foreign policy towards Russia were, largely, successful.(Brzezinski, 2010) Obama's 'reset' policy reflected his intentions

to improve the geopolitical partnership with Russia. This approach, departed from Bush's 'looking deep into the soul' approach in 2001. (Bush, 2010)

The desire of both countries to improve their relations became evident on several occasions, during the first term of the Obama Administration. Most notably, the June 2010 meeting between Obama and Medvedev in Washington, the incident regarding the identification of Russian espionage in the USA, and the ratification of the START treaty from the American Congress and the Russian Duma. (Mattox, 2011)

Despite the significant efforts of the Obama Administration for rapprochement, the situation changed in 2012. The first signs came during Putin's presidential campaign in 2011, where Anti-Americanism became a central theme of his campaign. (Stent, 2012) Moreover, Putin's accusations, that America was supporting opposition groups, continued after the elections. Russia's intentions became crystal clear when Sergei Lavrov that Russia no longer needed assistance from USAID, the foreign aid branch of the State Department that has been active since the early 1990's. (Stent, 2012) In addition, Russia refused to renew the Cooperative Threat Reduction program further endangering the prospects for cooperation.

Russia's actions did not go unnoticed in the United States. The Obama administration's 'reset' policy came under intense scrutiny from Republicans, which accused the President of being too timid to respond to the domestic crackdown in Russia and its attempts to pressure its neighbors. (Stent, 2012) Republican criticism extended, during the presidential debates, to include the failure of the Administration to contain Russian's policy on the Syrian uprising. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 forced the Obama Administration to adopt a much more aggressive stance towards Russia. Surprisingly, the policy response of the Obama Administration following the invasion of Ukraine was much more severe than that of the Bush Administration. (Böller and Werle, 2016)

Donald Trump: "Constructive Cooperation"

Before we analyze Trump's position it is important to assess what kind of Russia he will face at least in the early stages of his presidency. Russia continues to experience an economic freefall. The low prices of oil alongside the sanctions imposed in 2014 are prolonging the economic stagnation of Russian economy. Moreover, the combination of economic decline and widespread political corruption, as witnessed in Duma's rigged election last September, have created major waves of concern in the Kremlin regarding domestic support. Thus, Trump is likely to face a Russia "whose foreign policy has led to isolation and criticism." (Clarke and Courtney, November 21, 2016) Additionally, Russia's support of the Assad regime may have bolstered the regime but has incurred high political costs. The attacks on hospitals and civilian targets in eastern Aleppo on October 10, caused President Francois Hollande to talk about potential "war crimes" prosecution against Russia. However, the decline of ISIS, partly due to the recent loss of Mosul, might diminish US-Russian interest in Syria. Ukraine will, most likely, become Trump's toughest test. Despite Putin's declaration that he has no intentions to attack alone, Russian proxies and forces

continue to fuel an emerging conflict in Eastern Ukraine. (Clarke and Courtney, November 21, 2016)

For starters, Donald Trump's position on US-Russia relations resembles that of President Obama. He reiterates the need for a reset of relations in order to ease the tensions in Syria and elsewhere. He even went as far as to suggest the need to formulate an alliance with Russia. However, this is as far as the resemblance goes. Donald Trump claims that the Russian intervention in Ukraine is due to the fact that President Putin has no respect for Obama. 'President Obama is not doing what he should be doing in Ukraine,' (Gass, September 11, 2015) he said in September 2015, though he did not specify what the U.S policy should be.

In early 2016, during a telephone interview with the New York Times, Mr. Trump questioned the relevance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in today's security environment. Moreover, he argued that the cost of the Alliance for the United States was disproportionately high. 'It's become very bureaucratic, extremely expensive and maybe is not flexible enough to go after terror. Terror is very much different than what NATO was set up for.' (Haberaman and Sanger, March 26, 2016) However, despite his criticisms, Mr. Trump said that 'as president he would honor U.S treaty commitments under NATO, including defending the Baltic States from potential Russian encroachment.' (Council of Foreign Relations, 2016) Regarding the Middle East, Mr. Trump suggested that 'the United States should let Russian forces destroy the self-declared Islamic State in Syria.' (Council of Foreign Relations, 2016) Moreover, in October 2015, 'he characterized Russian airstrikes in Syria as a positive thing, adding that Russia would likely suffer the same fate as the United States in the region.' (Byrnes, October 6, 2015)

On a personal level, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin appear to share a feeling of mutual respect and perhaps understanding. The Russian President has complimented the GOP candidate and Mr. Trump has reciprocated by 'praising Putin's brand of leadership and stating that he would enjoy meeting the Russian leader.' (The O'Reilly Factor, September 29, 2015) The relationship between the two men, as well as the close ties between Moscow and some of Mr. Trump's top advisers, 'have led some to believe that a Trump presidency would be a boon to Mr. Putin.' (O'Toole, September 22, 2016) Mr. Trump has gone as far as to defend Russia from Democrats accusations regarding the incident of hacking the Democratic National Committee's network and leaked emails in an effort to help the GOP nominee. In July 2015, Mr. Trump essentially invited Russia to keep looking for potential incriminating evidence against his opponent, a statement which alarmed lawmakers from both parties. Mr. Trump attributes the good relationship he will have with the Russian President to his business background and frequent trips to Moscow.

The good personal relations between the two Presidents were reiterated by President Putin during the phone call they had on November 14. After their conversation, President Putin asserted that both men agreed to work for "constructive cooperation." (Clarke and Courtney, November 21, 2016) However, Russia's inflated sense of importance and aggression will likely, should they continue, will likely test Trump's tolerance early in his presidency. The fact that Russia's positions are not

pragmatic will continue to be a major obstacle for “constructive cooperation.” In October, Russia suspended the implementation of a U.S plutonium disposition accord. Moreover, the preconditions that Putin set for its resumption required the United States to reduce its military presence in a number of countries on NATO’s eastern flank. Essentially, Russia’s goal is to reverse the decision of the alliance to increase its presence in Eastern Europe. Additionally, Russia requested that the United States withdrew the sanctions imposed, following the annexation of Crimea, and to provide “compensation for the damage they have caused.”(World Nuclear News, October 04, 2016)

Conclusion

In summary, President Trump will inherit the same issues which dominated US-Russia relations during the Obama Administration. Russia’s policy towards its neighbors, missile defense and developments inside Russia will most likely dominate Trump’s Presidency as well. Though some aspects of these issues are somewhat different, most notably in Syria due to the decline of ISIS, Russia’s isolationist approach and continued aggression will surely put Trump’s policies to test very early in his presidency. The unreasonable demands of Russia and its inflated sense of self-importance are bound to elicit angry responses from a Republican-dominated Congress and Senate. Hence, should Russia continue on its aggressive path Trump will surely need to revisit his policy despite his, supposedly, good interpersonal relations with the Russian President. The intricate nature of US-Russia relations involves opportunities as well as challenges for the new President. What remains to be seen is how his policies will evolve over time and how adaptable he can prove to be.

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