

What Does Russia Want From President Trump?

fpri.org/article/2017/01/russia-want-president-trump/

January 30, 2017

E-Notes

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American President-elect Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin (Sources: Gage Skidmore (left) and RIA Novosti (right))

This article is based on Stephen Blank's presentation at the FPRI Symposium [25 Years since the Fall of the USSR: Where is Eurasia Headed?](#) which was held on January 26, 2017 in Philadelphia, PA.

As the Trump administration begins to formulate its policies, it is clear that both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin want to improve ties between Moscow and Washington. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev correctly described U.S.-Russia relations as having hit rock bottom. Indeed, signifying his desires to improve those ties, Trump has apparently spoken more to Putin than to any other foreign leader since his election, and even before his inauguration, Trump's advisors and Russian officials were already talking to each other about Syria's civil war. Since then, during Putin's conversation with Trump on January 28, 2017, the two sides apparently agreed to find ways to cooperate in Syria's civil war. Concurrently, many commentators on both sides of the Atlantic are trying to persuade Trump to follow their ideas on how to deal with Moscow.

Prospects for Rapprochement

But few, if any, of the commentaries written since Trump's victory have examined in any detail what Moscow has said it wants from Trump or what giving Russia what it wants might mean for U.S. interests, values, and allies abroad. While Russo-American re-engagement and rapprochement are desirable in principle, to achieve those outcomes,

there must be a basis of common interest. In other words, anyone urging the resumption of a dialogue with Russia that goes beyond a standard exchange of views must also understand and demonstrate for the U.S. government on what basis this rapprochement must occur.

Unfortunately, at present, there is little basis for rapprochement. After analyzing what Moscow has stated what it wants from a Trump administration, it becomes clear that the U.S. government or its allies cannot accept outcomes that, among other things, legitimate naked aggression and destroy NATO's cohesion. Moreover, in Asia, Russia continues to ally with China against U.S. and allied interests in Korea and the South China Sea. The failure to achieve Russo-Japanese normalization also shows that Moscow still prefers Beijing over Tokyo and is not likely to be an American partner in Northeast Asia, either.

Indeed, the main component of current Russo-American relations is that Vladimir Putin continues to wage an information war against the United States even after the election. Its most fundamental political institutions have done this with impunity. The idea that Putin did not actually want Trump to win is sheer nonsense. It is clear that the Russian government invested much time and money into a massive information warfare campaign—which has yet to be disrupted and can resume at any moment—against the Democratic Party. They also targeted Republicans and apparently the Republican Party, but did not disseminate any information about Republicans to the American electorate and wholly omitted any mention of Republican Party failings or Mr. Trump.[1]

This is not to say that Trump is a Manchurian candidate. But the connections of Trump, his family, and advisors to Russian elites raise serious and disturbing questions. Trump's financial indebtedness to Russian investors who are laundering dirty money in his real estate projects, his son's contacts with Russian clients and Russians over Syria before the election, his statements during the campaign in favor of Russian policy and Putin, and his advisors' political and financial ties to Russia as well as their ignorance about such institutions all raise the most serious questions concerning Trump's and his team's Russian connections.[2]

Russia and the West

Putin continues to wage a cold war against our allies in Europe. Russian intelligence forces recently launched an [unsuccessful coup in Montenegro to kill Prime Minister Djukanovic](#) to force a change of government due to Montenegro's joining NATO and refusing to give Russia a naval base in the Adriatic Sea. Worse, it used Serbian extremists for this purpose, highlighting the consequences of Moscow's unsavory connections to right and left wing extremist parties across Europe. Also, Moscow continues to wage an incessant information war against our allies; the Russians intend to unseat Prime Minister Angela Merkel of Germany, President Francois Hollande of France, and leaders in other countries like Sweden and Finland. It is also important to note the naked nuclear and conventional threats to Scandinavian, Baltic, and Balkan states.

In other words, war with the West for resisting Russia is the foundation of Russian foreign policy. Or as Sergei Ivanov, Putin's former chief of Staff and Defense Minister, told the *Financial Times*, "We regard the Cold war as a fact of life." Therefore, we must make clear what the Kremlin's objectives are in any rapprochement with the U.S., and Trump quickly needs to make clear what U.S. interests vis-à-vis Russia are if this rapprochement is not to be an undisguised surrender of U.S. interests and allies.

Russian spokesmen have made clear what they want. First, they want a reversal of NATO's current military buildup in response to Russian aggression and incessant conventional and nuclear threats in Europe. This movement of NATO forces away from proximity to Russia also includes the demolition of the missile defense base opened in early 2016 in Deveslu, Romania. Thus, essentially, Moscow is demanding that NATO and its partners like Sweden and Finland be defenseless for it has clearly demonstrated that it regards any effort by European states to defend themselves as a threat to Russia. Implicitly, the world has returned to an era when Russia explicitly made clear that its security depends upon the insecurity of all its interlocutors.

Second, [the record of Trump's conversations](#) with Vladimir Putin clearly signaled Russia's desire to see an end to

sanctions, which are seriously injuring Russia's economy despite Putin's rhetoric to the contrary, and to see a return of Western and U.S. trade and investment in Russia. Third, Moscow insists that the U.S. repudiate any support for anti-Assad forces in Syria and accept Assad's continued rule as a precondition for any participation in a joint anti-terrorist campaign, presumably against ISIS. Moreover, Moscow will demand an equal leading role in any joint campaign against ISIS.

Fourth, in that conversation, Putin also stated his desire for an end to what he calls "U.S. intervention" in the internal affairs of other countries. In other words, Putin and his government want an end to all efforts to promote democracy in Europe and the former USSR, if not elsewhere. The call to desist from supposed political interference in other countries' internal affairs represents a call for the West to allow Russia a free hand to do as it pleases at home and abroad and thus close the former Soviet space to any Western influence, essentially recreating a no-go political sphere for the West that would be under Moscow's effective control. At the same time, such freedom of action would embolden Russia to promote its campaign to export Putinism (i.e., authoritarian and wholly criminalized regimes) all across Eurasia.

Fifth, Moscow demands that the West not only accept the annexation of Crimea, but also end sanctions and force Ukraine to accept the [Minsk II accords](#), which Russia violated before the ink was dry on the text. The Minsk II accords would convert Ukraine into a confederation with two provinces completely controlled by Moscow in ways that would make it all but impossible for an independent Ukrainian state to function. Ultimately, [Putin demands](#) what Russians obsessively call an equal standing with the U.S. to determine the fate of other countries—as they imagine things to have been at the 1945 Big Three Summit at Yalta.

Prospects for Deal Making

To be sure, there are opportunities to cooperate with Russia that might advance U.S. interests, specifically regarding Syria. Such a deal means accepting the consequences of the Obama administration's mistakes in Syria, particularly in approving Assad's continued rule. The only way we can realize U.S. interests, humanitarian or otherwise, in Syria is by invading it with U.S. forces or arming pro-American forces to the hilt. Neither alternative is remotely possible—let alone acceptable (in the case of invasion)—to the U.S. Congress and public. So a deal could be consummated here to wipe the slate clean and begin afresh, but the quid pro quo should not be in the Middle East because Washington does not need Moscow to defeat ISIS.

For these reasons, the quid pro quo for recognizing Assad and taking our irretrievable losses up front should be in Europe or in East Asia regarding North Korea. In theory, agreement with Moscow on ways to reduce North Korea's nuclear and missile threat to our allies might be attainable. But, in practice, Moscow has allied itself with Beijing across Northeast Asia. Consequently, Russo-Chinese statements assign responsibility for the North Korean nuclear program to the U.S. for supposedly threatening North Korea. Its leaders and analysts regard North Korea's nuclearization as the fault of the U.S. and insist on giving Pyongyang more economic benefits supposedly to induce it to stay friendly with Moscow.^[3] This Russian policy, whatever its merits, will hardly bring about nonproliferation or for enhanced security in Northeast Asia. Instead, it is a strategy driven in equal parts by anti-Americanism, dependence, even if resented, upon China, and the habitual Russian inclination to see its Asian policy as a means to leverage gains against Washington in Europe.^[4]

Europe, indeed, is the crucial sector in this relationship because Moscow's continuing multi-dimensional war against the U.S. and its allies is most deeply expressed in Europe. One reason for Russia's intervention in Syria was to induce Western leaders to reverse sanctions. This notion that Russia is an enemy of terrorism is misbegotten because Russia actually is a sponsor of state terrorism, thanks to its continued arming of and collaboration with Hezbollah and Iran; its terrorism in Ukraine, specifically in Khar'kiv and Odessa as well as the downing of flight MH17; its acts of terrorism against its own citizens in the North Caucasus; its support for Kurdish terrorists in Turkey; and its efforts to launch coups d'état abroad (e.g., in Montenegro).^[5]

In fact, all of Moscow's demands regarding European security aim at the destruction of NATO as a factor of European security. Removing NATO forces from the Baltic, Balkans, and the Black Sea areas means leaving Europe defenseless against a force that has shown it has no respect for any of the treaties signed after 1989, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors, or arms control treaties. Russia's goal is a totally free hand to do as it pleases, while the West would be bound by the fear of losing business with Russia and treaties that for Moscow are mere scraps of paper.

The demand to end sanctions and resume trade and investment in Russia means Western support for the economic revival of a state, economy, and military oriented to the destruction of the sovereignty and integrity of U.S. allies. It would truly be a manifestation of the capitalists selling the rope with which to hang themselves, as the old Soviet phrase went. Beyond that, it would allow Russia to continue using its energy and other economic capabilities to fund the wholesale subversion of Western media, commercial, financial, and political sectors by bribes, takeover, corruption, and the threat of withholding energy sales or trade from European countries. Removing sanctions without a meaningful quid pro quo, like withdrawing from Ukraine (the actual cause of the sanctions), merely gives Russia a free hand to continue waging economic warfare against Europe and its neighbors without having to answer for its activities, while Western actors would be excluded from influence on Russia. If Moscow wants investment, it should learn from China's past example and give investors real chances to profit and stop waging economic warfare upon its would-be partners.

Similarly, the call to desist from supposed political interference in other countries' internal affairs represents a call for the West to allow Russia a free hand to do as it pleases at home and abroad and thus close the former Soviet space to any Western influence, essentially recreating a no-go political sphere for the West that would be under Moscow's effective control. Moreover, it would hardly constrain Russia from carrying out its systematic information war against the U.S. and Europe, subsidizing extremist political parties, or using Russian organized crime to subvert and corrupt governments along with its clients in Europe who receive support from the security services. At the same time, such freedom of action would embolden Russia to promote its campaign to export Putinism (i.e., authoritarian and wholly criminalized regimes), all across Eurasia. In these Russian policies, espionage and subversion through multiple channels of influence play, as they did in Soviet times, a prominent role. As a matter of fact, by every account, Russian espionage in Europe and the U.S. is at its height—signifying Moscow's deeply rooted belief that it is at war with the West—so any such agreement would fracture allied morale, demonstrate a lack of support for Western values, and open up every Western government to Russian political warfare abroad.

Russia will also strengthen its use of economic, political, and information warfare, including organized crime, operating in conjoined fashion to undermine the EU, European integration, and the spread of democracy: the only factors that have ensured that Europe does not once again explode into major war. It will continue its military buildup, fortified by Western infusions of capital and use the new capabilities it acquires to threaten a demoralized West with conventional and/or nuclear attack. The Kremlin will also continue to use its energy assets as a weapon of economic warfare to blackmail Western governments into concessions along with the European Union which it will seek to neuter as a force for European integration and governance. Russia will also not stop trying to spread Putinism and corruption abroad to check the advance of liberalism and democracy in Europe, and it will champion restive national minorities everywhere to destabilize neighboring governments as it has done for centuries.

Prospects for Peace

Too many analysts of Russia fail to grasp that Putin's programs entail war whether it be hot or cold. They entail war because at home, no reforms to his system are conceivable as long as his system remains in power. Therefore, since he cannot give bread, like Roman Caesars before him, he must resort to circuses, and in this case, those circuses are imperial adventures that are constantly reinforced by incessant domestic mobilization against imaginary foreign and domestic enemies. The idea that Russia is a besieged fortress fighting to save its identity and Christian values against a decadent and threatening West will remain a hallmark of the regime's self-presentation. Likewise, the structural militarization of the economy, polity, and readiness to use force abroad will, for the same

reasons, continue to be a second hallmark of Putin's Russia. But beyond these reasons, war is the ultimate outcome of Putin's policies. Even Russia's Muslims have been fighting in the North Caucasus for over twenty years. Putinism entails war because it mandates that for Russia to be secure, the country must be a great power (i.e., an empire whose neighbors are secure only to the degree that Russia allows them to be secure). If Russian security is contingent upon its neighbors' insecurity and diminished sovereignty, two classic signs of empire, those neighbors will resist and fight. Thus, we will see more protracted conflicts all over Eurasia if not even bigger wars. Indeed, the [U.S. Army already believes that within five years](#), a war in Europe is quite likely.

Therefore, for there to be a meaningful rapprochement with Russia, we must demand an end to the intervention in Ukraine, a withdrawal from Crimea, and the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty as well as a renewed commitment to the treaties that have been broken regarding states' security, sovereignty, integrity, and arms control between Russia and its partners, both nuclear and conventional. While Russia represents an increasingly clear and present danger to its neighbors, it is only in the fevered imagination of Putin and company that the West threatens Russia. A deal or deals that allows the Russian threat to stand and further disarms Europe militarily, economically, politically, and morally cannot be the basis for U.S. or European security. Instead, it will be the basis for future war. While re-engagement and rapprochement with Russia are possible, they are only feasible if there exists a basis of common interest and, more importantly, common or shared truth upon which both sides can build. And from everything we have seen, Putin's Russia is unlikely to even grasp that fact, let alone implement it.

[1] Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution, January 5, 2017, p. 3.

[2] Tom Hamburger, Rosaline S. Helderman, and Michael Birnbaum, "Inside Trump's Financial Ties To Russia and His Unusual Flattery of Vladimir Putin," www.washingtonpost.com, June 17, 2016; Matthew Mosk, Brian Ross and Patrick Revell, "From Russia With Trump: A Political Conflict Zone," September 22, 2016; "Natasha Bertrand, "Memos: CEO of Russia's State Oil Company Offered Trump Adviser, Allies a Cut of Huge Deal If Sanctions Were Lifted," *Business Insider*, January 27, 2017; <http://www.businessinsider.com/carter-page-trump-russia-igor-sechin-dossier-2017-1>.

[3] Stephen Blank, "Russia and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Tests," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 26, 2016, www.jamestown.org; Stephen Blank, "Missile Defense in Korea Further Roils US-Russian Relations," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 22, 2016

[4] (Editor's Note: For a contrary view, see "[Russia can curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions](#)," *East Asia Forum*, January 21, 2017, by Rens Lee of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and Artyom Lukin of the Far Eastern Federal University.)

[5] Higgins; Alexander J. Motyl, "Putin's Russia as a State Sponsor of Terrorism," *World Affairs Journal*, April 14, 2014 <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/putin%E2%80%99s-russia-state-sponsor-terrorism>, *World Affairs*, April 14, 2014; Taras Kuzio, "Is Russia a State Sponsor of Terrorism?" *New Eastern Europe*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/interviews/1461-is-russia-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>; "Iran Looks to Spend \$8bn on Russian Arms," www.rt.com, February 16, 2016; Jesse Rosenfeld, "Russia Is Arming Hezbollah, Say Two of the Group's Field Commanders," *The Daily Beast* January 16, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/11/russia-is-arming-hezbollah-say-two-of-the-group-s-field-commanders.html>; "Turkey's Erdogan Accuses Russia of Arming Kurdish Militants," *Newsweek*, May 31, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/turkeys-erdogan-accuses-russia-arming-kurdish-militants-464989>; Valery Dzutsev, "Repercussions of Moscow's Expansionist Foreign Policy in North Caucasus," *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, September 17, 2014.