



U.S. and Russia Relations Under Trump and Putin

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Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The detritus of the U.S.-Soviet Union relationship remains a part of the U.S.-Russian relationship. During the Cold War, U.S. policy went from containment to détente to confrontation. Today, the vicissitudes of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s engagement with the United States range from the productive—the Iran nuclear deal is one example—to confrontation—Ukraine is a good example—to doing a bit of both—Syria is an example of this. Putin wants Russia to not only have a seat at the table where decisions are made about global international issues but also wants the seat once held by the former Soviet Union.¹

In other words, Putin wants a return to the great power politics of the Cold War and a free hand in the territory that was part of the Soviet Union. In this regard, Putin needs the United States as an adversary, though not necessarily as an enemy.² This sort of dynamic allows him to maintain political support at home—he is protecting Russia from an outside threat—which allows him to avoid fixing an economy that is faltering³ and addressing the corruption that is a significant part of the political scene.⁴

The incoming team of President-elect Donald J. Trump has sent confusing signals as to how it intends to respond to Russia, as well as whether it wants to take a dramatically different approach to Putin than did President Barack Obama. Trump has had good things to say about the Russian president, and he sent his son, Donald Jr., to Paris in October to talk about Syria with pro-Russian Syrian opposition leaders.⁵ On the other hand, the president-elect’s new national security adviser, retired Gen. Michael Flynn, was very critical of Russia in his recently published book, “The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies.”⁶

The approach of the Trump administration toward Russia should be based on American interests, not on what will appease the Russians. Moreover, engagement with Russia will not be an option for the new administration; it is a necessity. While the relationship between the United States and Russia has many

facets, three areas require immediate attention: the conflict in Syria; the situation in Ukraine; and the Russian disinformation campaign and cyberattacks. If each of these issues is dealt with firmly, they could steer U.S.-Russian relations in a productive direction. There are specific steps the incoming administration should take in responding to these three areas:

- **Syria:** Limiting, at least initially, immediate goals to dealing with the humanitarian crisis
- **Ukraine:** Implementing the Minsk II agreement, which lays out a road map for ending the fighting in the eastern portion of the country
- **Russian hacking and disinformation:** Working with Congress, allies, and the private sector to develop a unified response to Russia's disinformation campaign and ongoing cyberattacks

The concern is that the new administration will not rise to the occasion,⁷ which will hurt U.S. national security interests at a time when the United States can ill afford it.

Russia and Syria

Three considerations define Russia's policy toward Syria. First, President Putin is fighting to ensure that Russia does not lose but instead gains influence in Syria and the Middle East, and that influence is tied to the fate of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a kind of contemporary version of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which in this case is limited to Russia justifying its intervention in a country when it thinks its interests are being threatened.⁸ Second, Putin becomes nervous when he sees states crumble from within with what he believes to be the help of outside actors such as the United States, which is what he thinks is happening in Ukraine.⁹ And third, Putin wants the world to know that Russia is back in the Middle East, Europe, and globally. He wants the world to know that Russia is a power that must be reckoned with and cannot be ignored.¹⁰

In Syria, Russia has decided that its interests can be best maintained by defending the Assad regime.¹¹ This obliges Russia's and Assad's forces to work with the Iranians, which is complicating for the Russians, since they were part of the P5+1 negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. In addition, after the Russians publicly announced they were using an Iranian air base to launch airstrikes in Syria, the Iranians, who did not like the publicity, backed off from the arrangement.¹²

Nonetheless, Russian involvement has changed the military landscape in Syria. Before Russia became directly involved in supporting Assad, his fight with the Syrian rebels was collapsing. Russian air power has allowed Syrian- and Iranian-backed forces to gain the upper hand against the rebels.¹³ This is not to say that Russia is all in for Assad or against a political settlement. The Russians have said that at the very least Assad needs to be part of any political arrangement going forward¹⁴ and that the United States must separate the rebels it backs from jihadi elements such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham—formerly the Al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra. The separation is something the Russians have demanded of the United States.¹⁵ But Russia is less emphatic about whether Assad needs to remain in power over the long term.¹⁶

The Russians have also justified their air campaign as a war against terrorists, particularly Fateh al-Sham and the Islamic State, or IS. In a speech to the United Nations in 2015, Putin called on the United States and others to join a coordinated response to terrorist groups.¹⁷ But actions speak louder than words, and the Russians continue to bomb all targets indiscriminately, including Syrian hospitals, women, and children.¹⁸ Only a relatively small portion of Russian airstrikes target IS.¹⁹ The Russians have agreed to cease-fires with the United States and others and have even said that they would impose their own. Unfortunately, these are Potemkin cease-fires—a lot of rhetoric with very little follow-through.²⁰

For the moment, the United States seems to have little chance of stopping the Russian airstrikes in Syria.²¹ U.S. military involvement in Syria is focused primarily on defeating IS,²² along with a Sisyphean effort to find a diplomatic solution, which will not succeed unless the United States can exert some leverage over the Russians. The Kremlin's refusal to stop bombing civilians and help put in place a consistent flow of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Syria could be a point of leverage for the United States, the United Nations, and other concerned nations to take action against Russia by increasing sanctions or signaling there will be military support for the delivery of aid.

The Russians, however, have their own problems as a result of their involvement in Syria. Part of the reason the cease-fires have collapsed and the political track has not succeeded may be the fact that the Russians have limited control over Assad and his political agenda.²³ Assad seems willing to go his own way in consolidating power, taking the Russian line that this really should be a fight about defeating terrorists—and to his mind, all rebels are terrorists.²⁴

It is also unclear what the Russians have achieved in Syria, or what Assad controls. After five years of war, Syria no longer exists in a form recognizable six years ago. In addition to fighting with the rebels, the Assad government is more like one of the three governments in Libya.²⁵ It has limited influence, and its control over a uniform Syrian state, even a truncated Syrian state, is dwindling. In its place are various corrupt and criminal elements that are more local in their interest than national.²⁶

The other problem confronting Russia is the impact that its military action in Syria will have on potential terrorist activity at home. Russia has 20 million Muslims, giving it the largest Muslim population in Europe aside from Turkey.²⁷ The Russian capital, Moscow, has a population of 1.5 million Muslims, and there may be as many as 500 IS recruiters in the city.²⁸ This is significant because as

many as 90 percent of IS fighters from Central Asia were recruited in Moscow.²⁹ As it returns home, this group not only poses a threat to its home countries but also, potentially, to Russia, who is seen as the enemy at least in part because of its activity in Syria.³⁰

All these complications do not make it any easier to find a long-term political solution in Syria. The intense diplomacy conducted by the United States and Russia for a solution to the Syrian crisis is unlikely to continue with the incoming Trump administration if press accounts of the president-elect's approach are correct.³¹ A more limited focus on the humanitarian catastrophe, putting aside for the moment U.S.-Russian led political discussions, may yield better and more immediate results. There are 6.1 million internally displaced people in Syria. There are 4.8 million Syrian refugees living outside their homeland. More than 13 million Syrians need aid. This is a catastrophe that must be addressed.³²

Ukraine

Russia's present involvement in Ukraine reaches deep into Russian history. Modern Russia claims Kyivan Rus'—the ancient federation of East Slavic tribes—as its origin; indeed, Moscow was founded by a prince of Ukraine.³³ There has always been a tug of war within Ukraine between east and west. Crimea, which was traditionally part of Russia, was given to Ukraine by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, himself Ukrainian, at a time when the formal relationship with Ukraine made little difference, since both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union.³⁴ Putin looked at the potential economic ties between Ukraine and the European Union as problematic and at Ukraine's push to join NATO as a threat.³⁵ Putin does not want the European Union intruding into the post-Soviet space.

The present standoff between Russia and Ukraine vacillates from progress, however limited, toward an agreement to readying for potential confrontation. President Putin appears to be using the conflict to gain leverage over the Ukrainian government. In response, NATO is stationing four battalions in the Baltic states and Poland.³⁶ It has held maneuvers in Poland and the Baltic nations.³⁷ Additionally, the United States and the international community have given Ukraine billions of dollars in aid, and several countries have provided Kiev nonlethal defensive military equipment.³⁸

For its part, Russia has held military maneuvers in the Black Sea and bolstered its defenses in Crimea—including increasing support with military hardware and personnel for the pro-Moscow, Russian and separatist forces in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine—that are largely controlled by Moscow. In addition, it has stationed anti-ship missiles in the Baltic region, and it intends to permanently station an air missile defense system in Kaliningrad, also in the Baltic region.³⁹ The Russians were also involved, along with the rebels, with the 2014 shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 traveling over Ukraine, in which 298 innocent civilians were killed.⁴⁰ This prompted the European Union and the United States to toughen sanctions against Russia and has made any lifting or lessening of sanctions less likely, at least in the near term.⁴¹

While the domestic political and economic situation in Ukraine remains troubled, there is consensus in Ukraine about stopping the Russians from splitting Ukraine apart any more than it has already.⁴² Russia's provision of leadership; funds; weapons; and, in some cases, regular units of the Russian army makes the Kremlin complicit in Ukrainian internal problems.⁴³ The outright annexation of Crimea by Russia is an issue that violates international law and undermines international political order to a degree that the world has not seen since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁴⁴

There have been a number of efforts to address the crisis in Donbass. The Minsk process, so called as discussions took place in the Belarus capital, has gone through two iterations. Minsk II, which is the current agreement between the fighting parties, includes a cease-fire; the withdrawal of heavy weapons; monitoring of the cease-fire by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; amnesty for combatants; Ukrainian control over its own borders; a political dialogue; some decentralization of political authority; special status for Donbass; elections in Donbass; and withdrawal of all foreign forces and weapons from Ukraine, among other things.⁴⁵

But the relationship between Russia, Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States is more complicated than implementing Minsk II. Russia views Ukraine as part of its "near abroad," or within its historic sphere of influence.⁴⁶ Russia draws a line with certain countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union moving too close to the West. The Europeans and the United States believe that the Ukrainians should be able to decide their own fate, and the fighting in Donbass and the illegal annexation of Crimea flies in the face of European and U.S. values and interests.⁴⁷

Hacking and disinformation: 2 sides of the same coin

As part of his strategy to treat the United States as an adversary, President Putin has used hacking and a disinformation campaign—the spreading of fake news—to attempt to undermine American politics and political institutions.⁴⁸ Putin has admonished Americans concerned over who hacked the emails of the Democratic National Committee, or DNC, and Clinton campaign chairman and Center for American Progress board member John Podesta, declaring that what matters is the content of the emails.⁴⁹ Putin seeks to make the U.S. system of government and politics look flawed and feckless. He wants to reduce Americans' confidence in their system, which also lets him deflect outside criticism of the Russian political system. Putin's blatant interference in the recent U.S. presidential election helps him make that point.⁵⁰

A recent joint statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security states that the Russians interfered with the U.S. presidential election: “The U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations.” The statement went on to indicate that, “Such activity is not new to Moscow—the Russians have used similar tactics and techniques across Europe and Eurasia, for example, to influence public opinion there. We believe, based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts, that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities.”⁵¹

The issue is not only hacking. It is also the proliferation of disinformation. Russian disinformation efforts are not new. The term “disinformation” dates back to the old Soviet days of spreading propaganda and false stories as part of its effort to undermine the United States and its allies. In that regard, not much has changed.⁵²

The dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories by the Kremlin has been a particularly acute problem for Europeans for some time. Russia attempted to undermine the government of Sweden's deliberations as to whether Sweden

should join NATO.⁵³ In that instance, the Russians used disinformation to cause concern among Swedish citizens on what joining NATO would mean for them. The Kremlin spread stories claiming that NATO would secretly store nuclear weapons in Sweden, that NATO could attack Russia from Sweden without Swedish approval, and that NATO soldiers could rape Swedish women with impunity.⁵⁴

The European Union accused Russia of supporting right-wing nationalist parties in Europe, evidenced in part by the fact that Russia gave France's far-right party, the National Front, an \$11.7 million loan in 2014.⁵⁵ It has also been reported that Moscow tried to influence the United Kingdom's Brexit vote, encouraging the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.⁵⁶

There are accusations in the Italian media that Russia interfered with the recent constitutional referendum in Italy, which caused the resignation of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.⁵⁷ This is part of a larger Russian effort to discredit democracy in general and institutions such as NATO and the European Union in particular. In dealing with perceived threats from the United States, the European Union, and NATO, Putin uses his disinformation campaigns to bring into question the validity of their political systems.⁵⁸ The movement away from more progressive governments in Europe to those that are more rightist, authoritarian, and in sync with Putin's hardline approach to politics is part of his plan to re-establish Russia internationally by undermining those whom he sees as adversaries.⁵⁹

Moreover, Putin's disinformation agenda is not strictly political. There are efforts to spread false rumors about the economies of EU nations and the United States. This includes attacking financial and economic experts whose analysis differs from the Russian agenda of discrediting the EU and U.S. economic agendas. The same tactics are used to spread false rumors about government corruption and international crises such as a U.S.-Russian nuclear conflict.⁶⁰

Russia uses media sources such as RT, a Russian television network, and Sputnik, a Russian-state-sponsored news source, to slant the news.⁶¹ These more mainstream sources of news in turn provide information that can be used and twisted by those websites that ignore the facts in order to create fake news and advance conspiracy theories, including sites such as Infowars.⁶² Other sites such as WikiLeaks get reams of information from Russian hackers,⁶³ as they did during the recent U.S. election campaign, which also included Podesta's hacked private emails and hacked emails from the DNC that were used to discredit the Clinton campaign.⁶⁴ While the hacking was not about fake news per se, it was about Russia's campaign to create havoc with the U.S. 2016 election.

This is war by other means from Russia. It is a battlefield that has expanded because sources and means of media have increased exponentially since the days when the Soviet Union was using disinformation and propaganda to spread its message and undercut the United States and its allies during the Cold War. Russian involvement in the recent U.S. election has helped make fake news part of political discourse.⁶⁵ The Russians take full advantage of this postfactual media culture and are willing to put the necessary resources into what Russia considers to be fertile ground for confrontation with the United States and the European Union.⁶⁶ French poet Charles Baudelaire said, “The devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.”⁶⁷ Russian disinformation and hacking attacks do exist.

The United States and the European Union must do all they can to counter and dismantle Russian disinformation and hacking, or their institutions could be permanently undermined. There is bipartisan, bicameral support in Congress to investigate the hacking issue.⁶⁸ And President Obama announced that he would look into it as well.⁶⁹ These are both positive signs that the seriousness of this issue will be addressed.

Recommendations

Syria

Limiting, at least initially, immediate goals in Syria to dealing with the humanitarian crisis. The effort to find a political solution—the constant back-and-forth between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov—has not produced results.⁷⁰ A narrower approach might have a better chance of succeeding, and if it does, it could lead to a broadening of the agenda of how to respond to the conflict in Syria.

For now, the focus should be on the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. The United States should let the Russians know it will support efforts to guarantee the delivery of supplies to innocent civilians in Syria, with military support backed by the United Nations if necessary. As part of this endeavor, the United States should lead an effort to secure a U.N. resolution that will support the use of force if necessary to get humanitarian assistance delivered.

At the same time, the United States should explore the possibility of working with Russia to set up humanitarian zones in Syria, which would allow humanitarian assistance to flow to innocent civilians more freely and regularly. The neutrality and security of these zones would be guaranteed by the United Nations with U.S. and Russian support.

Getting a U.N. resolution may be difficult to impossible. The recent Russian and Chinese veto of a U.N. resolution for a cease-fire in Syria to get humanitarian assistance to civilians in Aleppo is a case in point.⁷¹ If the Russians refuse efforts to ensure a steady flow of humanitarian assistance to Syria, there should be consequences. To that end, the United States has two options: working with the Europeans to impose Syria-related sanctions against Russia, and if sanctions do not get the Russians to support the effort, using NATO to protect the delivery of

humanitarian aid. The Russians have said that they support making sure humanitarian assistance gets to innocent civilians in Syria and elsewhere. If it refuses the proposal to get a U.N. resolution to use force if necessary to get the aid to those in need, Russia should pay the consequences.

Ukraine

Responding to the crisis in Ukraine necessitates a common agenda between the United States and its European allies. Although imperfect, the Minsk II agreement lays out a road map for dealing with the fighting in Ukraine. An Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe police mission to keep the warring parties in eastern Ukraine apart should also be supported by all concerned parties.

If Russia does not agree to implementing Minsk II, then increasing military assistance to Ukraine, in addition to increasing sanctions against Russia, has to be seriously considered. NATO's modest buildup of forces in Poland and the Baltic states, as well as NATO military maneuvers, should also continue. At the same time, the illegal annexation of Crimea cannot stand, and getting Russia to reverse this act needs to be part of broader discussions between Ukraine and Russia, supported by the United States, the European Union.

Hacking and disinformation

The cyber hacking and disinformation campaign being conducted by Russia has broader implications for U.S.-Russian relations than either of the conflicts in Syria or Ukraine. Cyberattacks and the spreading of fake news by the Russians have longer-term implications for the United States and its European allies. There needs to be a robust response by the incoming administration to the hacking supported by the Russian government and the spread of disinformation here and in Europe by Russian propaganda outlets.

The response to propaganda should be both defensive and offensive. With respect to hacking, the U.S. government, working with the private sector, should engage in a public education effort to ensure that all who use the internet and social media understand the threat from Russia and others and take precautionary measures, some as simple as regularly changing passwords. At the same time, government and industry should partner to develop new, more reliable security measures.

Defensive disinformation efforts should include responding to fake news stories, immediately, repeatedly, and clearly. When the facts clearly dispute conspiracy theories, as was the case with the recent confrontation at Comet Ping Pong in Washington, D.C.,⁷² they should be labeled as such. Even in a postfactual political and media environment, facts can still matter, perhaps more so than before. Challenging rumors, gossip, and innuendo publicly through social media is essential. The United States cannot devolve to a point where the *National Enquirer* is seen as a credible source of news. The Russian information war aims less at creating an alternative narrative than at throwing up a lot of smoke and dust to discredit all narratives, including the truth.

Offensive efforts should be both overt and covert. If someone attacks the United States, the U.S. response should be immediate and appropriate. The United States should also work with allies in Europe and elsewhere to protect cyber infrastructure. This effort should be government to government, as well as government in partnership with the private sector.

News sites and websites that regularly spread disinformation should be labeled as such, in the same way there are warnings about whether material on websites is suitable for children. Labels and filters should be developed to point out that certain websites and news sources are not credible and are purveyors of fake news.

Conclusion

The United States will need to engage Russia, and the incoming Trump administration has to determine if it will challenge Russia where necessary in key areas that are of particular interest and importance to America. This includes Syria, where a more limited approach in response to the humanitarian catastrophe should be tried. In Ukraine, there are measures that can be taken, such as implementing Minsk II, which, while imperfect, suggests a possible way forward toward a political solution. The first step would be a cease-fire and a permanent withdrawal of Russian military personnel, regular and irregular, as well as Russian weapons.

Equally important is the need to meet Russian cyber and disinformation disruptions head on. There has to be a sustained strategy by the United States and its allies that has both offensive and defensive components to challenge Russian efforts on this front.

Congress has taken a lead with recent legislative action on these issues, and its role becomes more crucial with a new U.S. president who has no foreign policy experience and a predilection to be supportive of Russia's President Putin even when his actions run counter to U.S. interests.⁷³ Any attempt to undermine American interests, politics, political institutions, and values cannot be tolerated. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

About the author

William Danvers is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he works on a range of national security issues. Danvers has worked on national security issues for 35 years in the executive branch, Congress, various international organizations, and the private sector. Prior to joining the Center, Danvers was the staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for then-Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) and worked at the National Security Council and U.S. State Department during the Clinton administration. He also worked at the CIA and U.S. departments of Defense and State during the Obama administration. In addition, he served as deputy secretary-general of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris, where he was responsible for relations with nonmember nations, including regional programs in the Middle East, East Asia, and elsewhere.

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