

## U.S.–Russian Relations in the Next Presidency

*By Chris Miller*

**In Brief:** This paper examines the future of U.S.-Russian relations during the next administration, focusing on three main points. First, a strategy of ignoring Russia may seem appealing, but it is unlikely to work. The Kremlin can force itself on to Washington's agenda. As the wars in Ukraine and Syria show, Russia is willing to escalate conflict if it is not getting its way. Second, the United States will inevitably face short-term crises that will crowd out space for strategic thinking about what its long-term ties with Russia should look like. Third, balancing cooperation and confrontation in the U.S.-Russia relationship will remain essential—and will not get any easier. Disagreements over Ukraine, Syria, and other issues look set to continue. At the same time, Russia's capacity to disrupt American plans is not going away, and necessitates at least a base level of cooperation. Striking the right balance between these two contradictory demands will be one of the next president's primary foreign policy challenges.

### Introduction

Predicting the course of U.S.–Russian relations has never been easy. Ronald Reagan came to power promising to confront the “evil empire” by investing billions in missile defense and a six-hundred ship navy. He left office with the best ever relationship with the USSR. George W. Bush claimed to have found Vladimir Putin “trustworthy” after peering into his soul, but Bush's final year in office was dominated by Russia's war with Georgia. Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev pressed the reset button after each assumed the presidency, but in a matter of years the two countries were again at loggerheads, most notably over Ukraine and Syria.

The track record of predictions about U.S.–Russian relations, in other words, is not inspiring. The election of Donald Trump has many analysts in both Russia and the United States predicting a new age of cooperation. When Vyacheslav Nikonov, an influential Duma member and foreign policy expert, announced to Russia's legislature that Trump won the election, Duma members cheered and applauded.<sup>1</sup> Commentary in the United States and other Western countries has been no less convinced that the new administration will re-establish friendly relations with Russia, though this is more often accompanied by jeers than cheers.

This paper, however, will suggest that predictions of a new dawn of U.S.–Russian cooperation should be treated skeptically. True, it looks likely that the United States will try again to work with Russia in Syria — though not, it should be noted, for the first time. On top of this, the president-elect has at times suggested downgrading U.S. support for Ukraine, which could reduce tensions with Russia. But nearly every other political and foreign policy leader in the United States opposes such a move, including all the president-elect's key national security appointments thus far. Plans to expand the U.S. military, which the president-elect has repeatedly promised and which congress looks likely to fund, will not be received positively in Moscow. And though America's election season has ended, Russia's is just beginning, with a presidential vote scheduled for 2018. Anti-American rhetoric will play an important role in Putin's re-election campaign.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/donald-trump-wins-us-election-russia-putin-result-a7406866.html>

It would be naïve, therefore, to expect Détente 2.0. This paper will set out four more realistic predictions for U.S.–Russian relations over the next four years. First, the president-elect will not have the option of ignoring Russia, because he will face escalating crises if he tries to do so. Second, disagreements over Ukraine, Syria, and sanctions are likely to persist, though perhaps with some reduction of tensions. Third, continued disagreements about the structure of European and Middle Eastern politics are likely to persist, though Washington may find it can cooperate with Russia in Asia. Finally, whether he is ready or not, the president-elect faces a growing probability of a post-Putin Russia. For these reasons, expect Russia to remain a major foreign policy dilemma for the next administration.

## 1. Why Ignoring Russia is Not an Option

When the Obama Administration came to power, it had a positive agenda on which it wanted to work with Russia. From the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, to the New START Treaty, to the supply of U.S. forces in Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network, the White House had strong reasons to cooperate with Russia. On these issues and others, including trade and visas, the early years of the Obama White House led to some important breakthroughs, even if larger disagreements remained unresolved.

The president-elect will not enter office with a long list of goals to accomplish with Russia. The incoming national security team has made frequent though vague promises to work with Russia to fight ISIS. Otherwise, across all the major areas where U.S. and Russian interests intersect, the new administration will face a series of problems in which Russia is widely believed to play a destabilizing role from Ukraine to cybersecurity. Congress remains eager to sanction Russia and to support the Kremlin's opponents. U.S. public opinion has shifted somewhat over the course of the election campaign, but there is still little sympathy for Russia or for Putin.<sup>2</sup> The Cold War-era electoral influence of Polish and Czech voters — who cared greatly about maintaining a hawkish line on Russia — has declined. But it has been replaced by a dislike of Russia among liberals, who criticize Putin's human rights record, anti-LGBT legislation, and, now, election-meddling.

Given this attitude, many in Washington will think that outside of Syria,

“**Congress remains eager to sanction Russia and to support the Kremlin's opponents.**”

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vox.com/2016/9/9/12865678/trump-putin-polls-republican>

the best strategy is to ignore Russia and hope that the Kremlin won't cause any problems. Such a strategy will fail. Russia will remain on the new administration's radar screen because the Kremlin refuses to be ignored and because it has the tools needed to demand Washington's attention. The Kremlin has demonstrated it is willing to expend significant resources to ensure it plays the role of a “great power” in resolving conflicts. No matter how much the next president might wish to deal with more agreeable countries, the reality is that Russia will keep itself on the agenda.

From its first day in office, the new administration will confront ongoing military conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. Because Russia is a participant in both wars, neither can be ended without Moscow's assent. Winding down the violence will require either increasing pressure on Russia or giving it concessions. Either way, this will require taking the Kremlin seriously. Putin has the resources and the will to ensure that, for better or for worse, he remains one of Washington's key interlocutors.

## 2. Why Détente 2.0 Will Fail

News that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has met with the president-elect to provide foreign policy advice only strengthened the widespread view that the new administration will seek to improve relations with Russia. Kissinger, the architect of détente with the Soviet Union during the 1970s, has argued that America should work with Putin. And Trump, whose campaign was vocally supported by some Russian elites, says he wants better relations with Russia, with the aim of confronting ISIS.<sup>3</sup> These statements have sparked fears among those in the United States and Europe who oppose Russia's military adventurism that the new administration will take a softer line on the Kremlin, leaving European allies and partners undefended.

At the same time, many Russians are optimistic about the prospects of better ties with the new administration. Some in Russia believe America's president-elect is willing to divide the world into spheres of influence, thereby recognizing Moscow's right to dominate its neighbors. Other Russians think that Trump will adopt a foreign policy of “offshore balancing,” as if he is a reality TV version of John Mearsheimer. True, the president-elect as promised to end nation-building and make foreign policy more America-centric. So did Barack Obama and George W. Bush.

The president-elect's Russian supporters are likely to be disappointed — and his critics consoled — by the reality that change in U.S.–Russian relations will be slow, and improvements halting. There are two main short-term reasons — Syria and Ukraine — coupled with a broader

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/us/politics/trump-new-york-times-interview-transcript.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=b-lede-package-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>

disagreement about America's and Russia's role in the world. The wars in Syria and Ukraine will be far harder to resolve than the new president's supporters and his critics hope. And agreement between Washington and Moscow about the shape of European politics looks unlikely so long as the Kremlin wants a rewriting of the post-Cold War order. So long as these disagreements persist, Détente 2.0 looks unlikely.

## *The War in Syria*

Start with Syria, where the prospects for cooperation between the Trump administration and the Kremlin look strongest. The president-elect has promised to cut off support for the "moderate opposition" in Syria.<sup>4</sup> Such a move would be welcomed in Moscow, and it would facilitate cooperation between the two countries in combatting ISIS. Cutting off aid to the "moderate opposition" would also mean that Washington is at least a de facto recognizing that Bashar al-Assad's government will remain in control of most Syrian territory indefinitely.

If this happens, it will remove one impediment to better for U.S.–Russian ties. But what would happen next? Regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia see Assad a client of Iran, which is the main reason they back the opposition. If they perceive U.S.–Russian cooperation on Syria as bolstering Assad, will they respond by stepping back, or by doubling down on their support for the rebels? If ISIS continues to lose territory in Eastern Syria, who will retake it? Thus far, some territory has been taken by Syrian Kurdish forces, some by Sunni Arabs backed by the West, and others by Assad. If the Sunni Arab opposition buckles, will the Kurds expand their control of Eastern Syria? If so, that would draw Turkey, which opposes the Kurdish statelet in Syria, even deeper into the war. The president-elect's position on support for Syria's Kurdish militias remains unclear, but they are strongly supported in Washington as a key tool against ISIS. The president-elect has expressed support for a "big, beautiful safe zone" in Syria, a proposal that Moscow has previously rejected.

Each of these dynamics could intensify disagreement between Washington and Moscow. The bigger challenge the new administration faces is the contradictory goals it has set out in the Middle East. First, cooperate with Russia against ISIS. Second, contain Iran. The problem is that Russia believes it benefits from a stronger Iran, and Iran and ISIS have partially complementary goals.<sup>5</sup> Syria is a prime example: it is difficult to see how working with Russia in Syria would not also strengthen Iran's position by bolstering Assad. In campaign mode, presidential candidates have the luxury of ignoring such contradictions. When in office, they must choose. It is difficult to see how the dilemma between partnership with

4 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/12/world/middleeast/donald-trump-syria.html>

5 <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/russia-sets-out-bring-middle-east-under-new-order>

Russia and containing Iran in the Middle East can be resolved.

## *The War in Ukraine*

The war in Ukraine looks no easier to wind down. The Minsk Process, which ostensibly governs the ceasefire and settlement process in Eastern Ukraine, will not be implemented in the near term. There are several reasons why. First, Russia has declined to make its proxy forces in Eastern Ukraine to fulfill ceasefire provisions because the threat of future violence is the Kremlin's only major piece of leverage in Ukraine. Second, Kyiv does not want to give Russian proxies in the Donbass a voice in Ukrainian politics, as Russia demands. Third, though Western powers continue to sympathize more with Kyiv's position, they are unwilling to take steps that might eject Russia from the Donbass. The baseline assumption, therefore, must be that the current stalemate will persist.

The U.S. election may have less effect than many people expect. True, on the campaign trail Trump suggested that he might lift sanctions on Russia and recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>6</sup> But though the president-elect regularly discussed his ability to work with Putin, he rarely spoke about Ukraine. When the president-elect mentions Russia, it is usually in the context of fighting ISIS in Syria. It is difficult to ascertain any clearly articulated policy toward Ukraine, Crimea, or the Minsk Agreements. Many of the president-elect's advisors have previously adopted hardline stances on Ukraine, including support for arming Ukraine.

Presume, however, that the president-elect aims to push Kyiv to make concessions to Moscow as part of a broader U.S. plan to improve ties with Russia. Washington could unilaterally cancel sanctions on Russia, but that would not change Kyiv's incentives in dealing with Russia. Kyiv would suffer more from reductions of U.S. financial support. But the U.S. Congress remains highly supportive both of sanctions on Russia and support for Ukraine. Leading Republican senators have already warned the president-elect about any attempts to ease sanctions.<sup>7</sup> Given this context, continued disagreement between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine seems likely.

6 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/31/politics/donald-trump-russia-ukraine-crimea-putin/>

7 [http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/11/15/us/politics/ap-us-congress-russia-reset.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/11/15/us/politics/ap-us-congress-russia-reset.html?_r=0)

“ **The problem is that Russia believes it benefits from a stronger Iran** ”

## *Détente or Ostpolitik?*

The dilemmas in Syria and Ukraine are likely to continue to poison attempts in Russia and the United States at cooperation. Despite optimistic rhetoric from the president-elect and from the Kremlin, no concrete proposals have been tabled besides Trump's promise to cut off support for the "moderate opposition" in Syria — and it is not yet clear who specifically that refers to. If this is the foundation of a new era in U.S.–Russian relations, it looks wobbly.

Indeed *Détente 2.0* faces an even broader challenge than Ukraine and Syria. The bigger problem is that there is little overlap in how the two powers believe that Europe should be governed. Here the history of Kissinger-era *détente* is instructive. By the early 1970s, both superpowers faced internal and external crises, and both were broadly satisfied with the existing division of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Reducing superpower competition made both sides better off.

That logic does not hold today. The United States is satisfied with how Europe is governed, supporting both NATO and the EU. The president-elect's campaign comments demanding NATO members spend more on defense were misguided, but they do not suggest that the U.S. is likely to tolerate a dissolution of the alliance in Russia's favor. Trump has already emphasized this in post-election comments. The Kremlin, by contrast, believes that Europe's institutions unfairly exclude it from the continent's decision-making processes. It may well be the case that the United States over the next presidential term is distracted from Europe by domestic politics. But whether that leads to better relations with Russia is far from guaranteed. Rather than *Détente 2.0*, it seems equally plausible that an increasingly isolationist America leads to *Ostpolitik 2.0*, as worried Europeans decide it is time to cut a deal with the Kremlin.

## 3. Why the New Administration Should Cooperate With Russia in Asia

America's disagreement with Russia over the shape of the Middle East might be resolvable, especially if the new administration succeeds in its goal of working with the Kremlin on Syria. Washington's disagreement with Russia over Europe, as discussed above, is likely to remain. Asia, however, is a sphere where the United States and Russia have some overlapping interests, most notably regarding managing China's rising influence. The United States is not used to treating Russia like an Asian power. But while conflicts in Ukraine and Syria look difficult if not impossible to resolve, the next administration may find room to work with

Russia in Asia.

Washington does not usually consider Russia in Asia context, for four reasons. First, the issues that dominate U.S.–Russian relations today, Ukraine and Syria, lie on Russia's Western frontier. Second, Russia has far more assets — military, economic, social, and cultural — in its European part. Siberia and the Russian Far East came under Moscow's control relatively recently, and they are sparsely inhabited and often ignored by the Kremlin. Third, the structure of U.S. bureaucracies and training of foreign policy officials means that most of America's Russia experts have more experience with European institutions such as NATO. By contrast, most U.S. officials who work in Asia have little familiarity with Russia. Finally, Washington is skeptical of interpreting Russia in an Asian context lest it either appear to give credence to a Russian–Chinese entente or legitimize the Kremlin's claims to lead a unique Eurasian civilization.

Today, Washington sees Russia in Asia as a threat rather than an opportunity. A peace deal between Japan and Russia to finally resolve World War II is interpreted in Washington primarily through the effect it would have on Japan's compliance with the sanctions regime. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union is seen both as a dud and as a threat to U.S. interests in Central Asia.

Over the course of the next presidency, however, the United States will face difficult tradeoffs as it deals with Russia in an Asian context. Washington is pre-programmed to confront Russia in Asia, but the next president will face the question of whether opposing Russia in Asia makes sense in the context of China's rise.

Yet as China continues to look outward — and especially as initiatives such as One Belt, One Road play a larger role in Central Asia — it will be harder to see Russia as America's primary competitor in Central Asia. In half a decade, the Eurasian Economic Union might be seen as the only hope of keeping Central Asian states from complete economic dependence on Beijing. Improving ties between Russia and Japan might be an important factor keeping Russia from overreliance on China in the Asia Pacific region.

## 4. Why it is Time to Prepare for a Post-Putin Russia

Vladimir Putin is only 63 years old, so he may still be ruling Russia long after the next president has left office. He is currently not far from the average male Russian life expectancy, though controlling for drinking and smoking — two activities from which Putin abstains — his likelihood of surviving the next eight years increases sharply. His likelihood

<sup>8</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest* (Harvard, 2005).

of political survival, by contrast, is harder to assess. Certainly Putin will be not ousted by the electoral process alone. Yet his assertion that Russia “can’t have a palace coup because we have no palaces,” however, is less credible.<sup>9</sup>

There is no reason to expect an immediate threat to Putin’s political position. But Russia’s palaces have a long history of housing coup plotters. The post-Stalin troika of Lavrenty Beria, Georgy Malenkov, and Vyacheslav Molotov was toppled by Nikita Khrushchev, and Beria was executed. Khrushchev himself was later forced into retirement by a coalition led by Leonid Brezhnev, though he escaped the firing squad. This year marks the 25th anniversary not only of the failed KGB coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, but also of Yeltsin’s decision to meet secretly in a forest lodge, abolish Gorbachev’s position, and seize the Kremlin for himself. There is a non-negligible chance, in other words, that for reasons of biology or political intrigue, the next U.S. president will be confronted with a post-Putin Russia. What would this mean?

The structure of Russia’s political system, in which informal institutions play a large role, make it difficult to say anything with certainty. On the one hand, some formal institutions are likely to survive Putin’s departure from the political scene. Russia’s constitutional order, for example, has persisted since 1993 and it is probably flexible enough to allow post-Putin political shifts without changing existing legal confines. Other institutions, such as the military and security services, will continue to play a significant role in Russian foreign policy making, and their skeptical view of relations with the United States will thus continue to be heard.

Yet it is also clear that personalities matter. The Medvedev era, for example, was a period of better U.S.–Russian relations in part because Medvedev was more amenable to cooperative ties than Putin.<sup>10</sup> Russian business elites remain more supportive of policies that would reduce confrontation with the West than are security elites. Historically, leadership transitions in Russia have often been accompanied by attempted foreign policy ‘resets.’ This was true after Stalin’s death in 1953, when Beria and Malenkov proposed reunifying Germany, even under capitalist auspices, before they were cast from power by Khrushchev.<sup>11</sup> A second attempted reset came after end of the Brezhnev era. Brezhnev’s successor Yuri Andropov vigorously promoted young reformist Mikhail Gorbachev, who after taking power in 1985 decided to free the Warsaw Pact states. The post-Putin leadership, when it comes, will also be tempted to press the

reset button, to blame past tensions on Putin personally, and to improve ties with the United States and other Western powers.

At the same time, however, post-Putin leaders will likely lack the personal legitimacy that most Russians believe Putin currently has. Putin has obtained this legitimacy both because he has been legally elected president (the many deficiencies of Russian elections notwithstanding) and because he has presided over a decade and a half of political stability and economic growth which, to most Russians, seem far better than the era that preceded Putin. His successor may well have the first source of legitimacy — that endowed by Russia’s formal constitutional order — but will lack the second. This is true even of figures who have worked closely with Putin and who are frequently mentioned as potential successors, such as Dmitry Medvedev or Sergey Shoigu. This lack of legitimacy could produce the opposite of a reset if it encourages Russia’s future leader to clash with the West as a means of rallying support. Putin himself adopted such a strategy after retaking the presidency in 2012, and it could well appeal to his successor. The risk is not of a Vladimir Zhirinovskiy-style figure taking power as much as a realization that Zhirinovskiy-style rhetoric and policies can mobilize domestic political support.

The base case assumption is that Putin will be re-elected to a new six-year term in 2018 and will stay in power until at least 2024. If so, the next U.S. administration may avoid having to deal directly with a post-Putin Russia. But the older Putin gets, the more frequently questions will be asked. Even if Putin exits the political scene via a heart attack or palace coup, the safest assumption is that Russia’s current political set-up and foreign policies will endure the transition to the post-Putin era. But this is hugely uncertain. A post-Putin Russia would present large opportunities and large risks.

## Conclusions

The past three presidents have sought to improve relations with Russia upon taking office, and the next president senses an opportunity to do the same. Historical experience suggests that these ‘resets’ may be useful in the short term, but that the U.S.–Russia relationship tends to revert to a more uncomfortable equilibrium after the initial period of optimism expires.<sup>12</sup> The most durable post-1945 “reset” — the period of détente under Nixon and Brezhnev — represented not friendship but a grudging willingness to cut hard-headed deals. And it was fought vigorously by hawks in Congress and on the Russian side. The reason all these resets, détente included, have been temporary rather than permanent is explainable not primarily by the personalities involved but rather by the

9 Jill Dougherty, “Crisis, What Crisis? Putin’s Marathon News Conference,” CNN, December 18, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/18/world/europe/putin-speech-dougherty/>

10 Michael McFaul, “Moscow’s Choice,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/eastern-europe-caucasus/2014-10-17/faulty-powers>

11 Joshua Rubenstein, *The Last Days of Stalin* (Yale, 2016).

12 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership* (Princeton, 2014).

deep differences in how the United States and Russia see the world, and particularly how they see Europe. Whatever new policies the new administration brings to Washington, historical experience suggests that these differences will continue to structure — and limit — the U.S.-Russia relationship.

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