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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

US-Russia Relations under Trump Presidency: Will The Reset Come to Pass?

By Bhavna Dave

Synopsis

Donald Trump's pre-election admiration for Russian president Vladimir Putin as a "strong leader" has raised hopes of a 'reset' of diplomatic relations since the deterioration of the US-Russia ties in this decade. While it hints at ending the sanctions on Russia, curtailing support to NATO and joining forces with Russia to combat ISIS in Syria, how likely is a breakthrough in US-Russia relations?

Commentary

DONALD TRUMP'S surprise victory as the US president-elect has raised the prospects of a rapprochement between him and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. Trump has also emphasised the need to work together with Russia in Syria to root out ISIS and other Islamist militants, and supports the removal of sanctions to reach an agreement on Ukraine. Russia is deeply implicated in both conflicts, both as a partisan power as well as a party that holds a key to a resolution.

Trump and Retired General Michael Flynn, his National Security Advisor appointee, have blamed the Bush Administration for the failed war in Iraq, and the creation of ISIS. An admission of the US' blunder could temper Russia's indignation with US unilateralism, but it would have to be followed by tangible and comprehensive plans for containing terrorism and initiating reconstruction. There is nothing in Trump's pronouncements to suggest that this is on the cards. Unlike Putin, Trump will encounter considerable domestic constraints and pressures from diverse

constituencies. There are fears that, as with much of his campaign rhetoric, the 'reset' button may not be pushed at all.

Ukraine and Sanctions

Trump's gaffe that Russia will not "go into Ukraine" when it had already annexed Crimea, and withdrawing support to NATO have unnerved Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic states and Poland. He has also disavowed any 'nation-building' role for the US, declaring Ukraine to be "a mess".

Any discussion on removal of sanctions would at the minimum require Russia to withdraw its support to breakaway regions in Ukraine. This is tricky when Russia denies any involvement amidst pervasive evidence that 'volunteers' pledging allegiance to the Russian state have been fighting the war against the Ukrainian government in breakaway Eastern regions.

Putin and the state-controlled media blame the "Fascists and extremists within the Ukrainian leadership" as well as the 'West' for the war. Sanctions have also bolstered a defensive sense of patriotism, anti-Westernism, militancy and solidarity with Putin.

Many hard-line Republicans have been vociferous about arming Ukraine and tightening sanctions. Many also share Obama's warning against taking a 'realpolitik' approach to relations with Russia, cutting deals that override international norms and abandon the pledge to protect Russia's vulnerable smaller neighbours.

Vice-president-elect Mike Pence has expressed strong views for strengthening missile defences against Russia. Mitt Romney, who could become Secretary of State, has described Russia "as the greatest geopolitical foe of the US" during his election campaigns in 2012. Those with expertise in Russia and Eurasia in Congress, the State Department and the Pentagon are far from a unified lot, with differing opinions, convictions and policy recommendations.

It is hard to mobilise support for lifting the sanctions when speculation on Russia's alleged meddling in the US elections (evidence is scanty), hacking of the Democratic National Committee's email and other 'interference' are likely to dominate the agenda as Trump takes office. Trump may also become preoccupied with domestic issues – undoing the legacy of the Obama administration by rescinding Obamacare, reversing his environmental policy gains, and launching a crackdown on illegal immigration.

Syria and the Battle against Islamic Terror

The colossal scale of devastation in Syria makes it a matter of greater urgency than Ukraine. Russian bombs have also killed scores of civilians, hit humanitarian convoys and obliterated the distinction between anti-Assad forces and the extremist factions fighting to establish an Islamic State.

There's been little substance to Trump's stance on Syria except that he will support Putin if "Russia helps us get rid of ISIS". Trump's Secretary of Defence-designate

retired marine general James Mattis has criticised Obama's policy in the Middle East and the nuclear deal with Iran, described ISIS as "a combined al Qaeda and Lebanese Hezbollah on steroids" and cautioned against an alliance with Russia, proposing a differentiated strategy to combat 'political Islam'. He is perceived as capable of 'reining in' Trump from reckless foreign policy moves, and caution in striking deals with Russia.

Gen. Flynn, who gave a paid speech at a public gig in Moscow sitting next to him, has made erratic and contradictory statements, praising Putin and also blaming Russia for failing to combat Islamist terror within, and supporting Iran.

Overall, the Trump administration would have to find the appropriate language, strategy, and vision to combat ISIS and the global spread of terrorist organisations without deploying Islamophobic rhetoric. Any strategic alliance with Russia and the Assad regime on combating ISIS and terrorism, devoid of an active commitment to protecting civilians and whatever is still left in Aleppo, would have pernicious ramifications across the globe, and especially in the Muslim world.

Personalities of Trump and Putin: Poles Apart?

There is the risk that the hope for a 'reset' may fizzle out even before it has taken off. Trump's favourable assessment of Russia rests on the spurious reasoning that Putin has said "many nice things" about him and "showed respect" to him. Mutual affinity, personal warmth, and shared concerns can certainly herald a much-needed breakthrough. But ties between two greater powers are too complex and multidimensional to be ameliorated by personal bonding alone.

There are also profound differences in temperament and style between the two men. Trump's policy pronouncements have lacked coherence, conviction, complexity or detail. In contrast to Trump's rash rhetoric, improvisations and impromptu outbursts, Putin, a martial arts black belt, knows how to measure his words, bide his time and strike at the opportune moment.

Putin will not put up with Trump's bluster unless he succeeds in persuading Congress to lift sanctions. Trump's popularity in Russia, a product of the state propaganda machine, could easily dissipate, and discredit the image of the US in Russia.

Like Trump's pledge to make America 'great', Putin also wants to restore Russia's declining global status. A scaling down on US commitments to allies, human rights, freedom would easily play into the hands of Putin, allow Russia to further exploit divisions within Ukraine, expose the small states protected by NATO, foment further divisions within the European Union.

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