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The Do-No-Harm Principle of Kremlin Relations

Принцип відносин з Кремлем: «Не нашкодь»

Незважаючи на всі логічні причини, за якими США і Росія повинні порозумітися, Москва і Вашингтон не можуть порозумітися в даний момент. Москва вважає суперництво з Вашингтоном обов'язковою умовою для ефективної зовнішньої політики – найкращим і, мабуть, єдиним перспективним засобом поліпшити статус Росії як великої держави і зберегти режим Володимира Путіна. Незважаючи на слова Путіна – а він часто заявляв, що він хоче хороших відносин з Америкою, – він встановив параметри взаємин шляхом цілого ряду кроків, в тому числі кричущих військових вторгнень в Грузію, в Україну і в Сирію, і узгодженої кампанії по підриву західної демократії. Тож адміністрація Трампа повинна наслідувати прикладу Сенату США і зміцнити санкції проти Росії. Крім того, Трамп повинен чітко заявити, що США не відмовляться від підтримки права України визначати власне політичне майбутнє, і це не залежить від будь-яких порожніх обіцянок, які Путін дає по боротьбі з тероризмом або по Північній Кореї (питання, на яке Москва практично не має значного впливу).

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Trump joins a long list of presidents who wanted to improve U.S.-Russia ties and damaged American interests in the process. Here's how he can stop the slide.

Imagine this: A new U.S. president, with no foreign-policy experience, has a bold idea. He will make a new friend for America. And not just any new friend, but one endowed with world-class natural resources, a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, and a landmass that bestrides 11 time zones.

Russia, he surmises, has long been misunderstood and neglected — a victim of outmoded, Cold War thinking, an aggrieved party injured by the last president's policies. He wagers that paying more attention to Moscow, and making nice with its leader, will go a long way to improve ties and secure American interests around the world. It may even earn him the Kremlin's cooperation — if not friendship — on counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and even China policy.

That president, of course, is not imaginary. And he is not one president but four: every president from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump. Each has tried to transform relations with Moscow, casting his Russia policy as fundamentally different from his predecessor's. But, with equal consistency, each has failed in his pursuits, leaving U.S.-Russian relations in even worse shape than his predecessor and sacrificing important U.S. interests in the process.

That's because, despite all of the logical reasons the United States and Russia *should* get along, Moscow and Washington *can't* get along right now. Moscow views competition with Washington as the sine qua non for an effective foreign policy — the best and perhaps only viable means to burnish Russia's great-power status and preserve Vladimir Putin's regime. As President Trump prepares for his first face-to-face meeting with Putin on July 7, Americans can only hope Trump avoids the mistakes of his predecessors. If he gives an inch, he should expect Putin to take a mile.

The one that got away

It's easy to understand why all of America's post-Cold War presidents have come into office seeking better relations with Moscow. Russia is tantalizing — a country with enormous potential, an attractive culture, and a rich history. Its people are well educated, predominantly Christian, and share a similar history with their European neighbors. Russia's literature and music comprise some of the high

points of Western artistic achievement. The cultural affinity between America and Russia is obvious and undeniable. And the apex of U.S.-Russian cooperation during World War II serves as an emotional touchstone that suggests the possibility of better relations.

A simple look at a map, moreover, can make even a staunch realist hopeful for improved ties. To the east, Russia borders China, whose ballooning population abuts the sparsely populated, resource-rich Russian Far East. To the south, Russia borders the Middle East, where internecine warfare threatens to spill over into Chechnya and other parts of southern Russia. Geopolitically, Russia confronts many of the same threats America faces. Russia's western border, with Europe, is by far its least troublesome. Many of the Soviet successor states, and seven of eight former Warsaw Pact countries, enjoy good relations with America. Why can't America, as Trump often muses, just get along with Russia?

The reason is simple. Russia's interests, as understood by Putin and his associates, fundamentally clash with America's. Having emerged from the chaos of the 1990s — in which Moscow lost seven vassal states in Europe, relinquished 2 million square miles of territory, and saw its streets descend into violence — Putin sought to reverse the “geopolitical catastrophe” that befell the Soviet Union. He fashioned himself something of a new tsar, a restorer of Russian greatness. And, as Putin sees it, the pillars of this greatness are a rock-solid autocracy at home, a strong military that can punish neighbors that defy the Kremlin, and a potent national security apparatus that can subvert U.S. interests around the globe.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Kremlin leadership has structured Russia's foreign and security policy in direct opposition to the United States. When it comes to relations with Washington, Moscow views the world as a zero-sum game. It does not see mutual benefit from substantive cooperation.

Regardless of Putin's words — he has often claimed to want good relations with America — he has set the parameters of the relationship through a series of actions, including brazen military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria and a concerted campaign to undermine Western democracy. The sum total of these actions is a confrontational policy toward the United States that will last as long as he is in power and perhaps beyond. Just as during the Cold War, the central objective of Russian foreign policy today is to weaken America and its allies and make the world safe for centralized Kremlin rule — now in the form of Putin's kleptocracy. Moreover, as Russia declines in virtually every indicator of economic and social well-being, Putin's legitimacy increasingly rests on his reputation as a nationalist stalwart who defends Russia against a hostile West. Given these circumstances, Putin would find it difficult to pivot to a constructive policy toward the United States unless he were willing to loosen his grip on power and enact liberal reform at home.

Meanwhile, with each U.S. president who has attempted to repair relations with Russia, the case for doing so has become progressively less persuasive. When President George W. Bush claimed to see Putin's “soul” in 2001, he was staring into the eyes of a former KGB officer who was then waging a brutal war against his own citizens in Chechnya. When President Barack Obama's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, presented Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with a misspelled “reset” button in 2009, Russia had invaded Georgia just seven months prior. Obama's initial Russia policy allowed Moscow to emerge from the Georgia adventure having suffered no real costs, sent a signal to Moscow that the “reset” would take place on Moscow's terms, and served as a test case for how America might respond if Russia invaded another non-NATO neighbor — as it did Ukraine in 2014.

But the case for rapprochement today is even worse than it was in 2009 or 2001. Trump's yearning for better relations comes on the heels of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, military intervention in support of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and assault on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. With this track record, it behooves the Trump administration to think twice before trusting Russia's intentions or taking unilateral steps in hopes of improving ties.

All talk, no action

Almost six months into Donald Trump's presidency, his administration has made little progress in improving U.S.-Russian relations. In April, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson — who was selected for his post due in no small part to his contacts in the Kremlin — visited Moscow only to fret that relations had reached a “low point.” When Trump received Lavrov at the White House in May, the meeting was overshadowed by Trump's decision to fire FBI Director James Comey less than 24 hours earlier. According to a summary of the meeting obtained by the *New York Times*, the highlight was Trump's gloating about his recent personnel action. “I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy, a real nut job,” Trump said, “I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off.”

What can Trump achieve with Russia? So far, the results have not been encouraging. Russia has persisted in supporting the Assad regime, expanded its military aggression in Ukraine, launched a wholesale assault on the French election, and threatened to target U.S. aircraft operating in certain parts of Syria. Moreover, the scandal surrounding the Trump campaign's contacts with Russian officials has only worsened after Comey's firing, raising further questions among Congress and the public about the wisdom of launching an ambitious new Russia policy under Trump's leadership.

It would be reasonable to expect that this dismal record, especially when combined with the political scrutiny accompanying former FBI Director Robert Mueller's Russia investigation, might persuade Trump to avoid a meeting with Putin until the time is right. Unfortunately, that will not be the case, as Trump has continued to press his staff to find ways to improve ties and will meet with Putin on Friday on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany.

Even more concerning, the White House has announced there is no real plan for the meeting. “We have no specific agenda,” National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster said. “It's whatever the president wants to talk about.” McMaster's nonchalant response reflects a White House divided about the wisdom of entering a meeting with Putin with no defined strategy.

Trump has reportedly asked his staff to provide a list of “deliverables” that could be presented to Putin as a signal of his genuine desire to improve ties. And if Trump's penchant for showmanship is any guide, he will be tempted to flip the script with one bold stroke, such as a deal that exchanges sanctions relief (which Trump can, for now, still deliver with the stroke of a pen) for a high-profile, substance-free announcement of a new U.S.-Russian partnership to fight the Islamic State.

If sanctions relief is a bridge too far, Trump could likely close such a deal by offering public support for Russia's leadership role in Syria and the preeminence of Russian-led negotiations to resolve the conflict. Such a move would mirror Secretary Tillerson's reported private remarks to U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres last week that Assad's future is now in Moscow's hands. Other possible concessions are the return of two Russian compounds that Obama closed after Moscow's interference in the 2016 election and the resurrection of bilateral working groups across the U.S. government, similar to the groups formed as part of Obama's 2009 “reset” policy.

Trump is known to love splashy headlines, but such a deal would be extraordinarily damaging for U.S. interests. Over the years, Putin has repeatedly dangled the prospect of deeper counterterrorism cooperation between Washington and Moscow. But he has never backed up his words with action. Despite the Kremlin's claims to be fighting the Islamic State in Syria, Russia's military operations have consistently been focused on bolstering the position of the Assad regime. To bring the extent of Moscow's dishonesty into relief, Putin recently claimed to show American filmmaker Oliver Stone a video of Russian forces striking the Islamic State in Syria — only for it to be revealed as footage of a U.S. Apache helicopter operating in Afghanistan.

Chto delat? (Or: What is to be done?)

Instead of gunning for headlines, Trump should enter the meeting with a simple mantra: do no harm.

Obama's responses to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and interference in the 2016 U.S. election should have been stronger, but their deficiencies should not distract from the fact that, by the end of Obama's second term, the United States had finally set in motion a range of deterrence,

reassurance, and preparedness measures to counter and contain an increasingly dangerous Russia. Rather than reverse these steps, the Trump administration should redouble efforts to defend America and its allies from Russian revanchism.

For starters, the Trump administration should take a page from the Kremlin's book and begin from a place of reality. No U.S. president can make Putin wake up and decide that Russia's interests are best served by being friendly to the United States or seeking to act as a good global citizen. The White House must eschew such pipe dreams and accept that U.S.-Russian relations will likely remain adversarial as long as Putin is in power and perhaps for decades to come.

The Trump administration should also follow the lead of the U.S. Senate and strengthen sanctions against Russia. It should give the green light to foot-dragging House Republicans to pass the Russia sanctions bill that the Senate recently approved 98-2, and it should make clear to the Kremlin that sanctions will not be lifted until Russia fulfills its Minsk obligations and respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Secretary Tillerson has publicly affirmed these conditions on several occasions, but Putin won't believe it unless he hears it directly from Trump. Additionally, Trump should make clear that the United States will not abandon its support for Ukraine's right to chart its own political future, regardless of any hollow promises Putin makes on counterterrorism or North Korea (an issue on which Moscow possesses little meaningful influence).

Meanwhile, the administration must prepare for future Russian attacks at home and attempts to undermine NATO cohesion and unity abroad. In his meeting with Putin, Trump must communicate clearly that the United States will not tolerate any further incursions in its democratic process. He should back this up by directing U.S. officials to work with European partners to develop a range of punitive options, including new sanctions, that can be deployed quickly if Russia interferes again in an election on either side of the Atlantic. Putin must realize that an attack on the democratic institutions of a NATO member will be treated as an attack on all and that the United States will respond with tough measures to support its allies. Moreover, the Trump administration should continue to bolster NATO's ability to confront the full range of Russian threats, including disinformation campaigns throughout Europe, covert action in the Balkans, and the use of military force in the Baltics.

On Syria, the Trump administration should engage with Moscow in an effort to end (or at least calm) the conflict, but it must not sacrifice U.S. interests in the vain hope that the Kremlin will genuinely commit to fighting the Islamic State, much less come around to supporting Assad's ouster. Trump must internalize that any public announcement of a U.S.-Russian pact on Syria would be a concession to Moscow, not a gift to Washington, and treat it as such. The White House should not seek to intertwine America's operations in Syria with Russia's, which would only come back to haunt the United States as it turns its back on other regional partners fighting Assad's brutal regime.

America needs a clear-eyed approach to Russia that cuts through the hyperbole and political finger-pointing that has followed Moscow's successful attack on the 2016 election. Russia is not a juggernaut — it is a much less fearsome adversary, for example, than the Soviet Union used to be — but it remains a critical threat to U.S. national security. As a world power, Russia is unlikely to return to its former heights, but it can do a lot of damage to the West during its fall back to earth. Putin is a master tactician who uses years of judo training to take advantage of unprepared opponents quickly. There is no doubt he will show up to his first meeting with Trump with a plan to advance Russia's interests at America's expense.

By accepting a meeting with no concrete agenda and having outlined no coherent demands or steps the United States will take if Russia fails to meet them, Trump enters his first tête-à-tête with Putin from a position of weakness. But if he stays true to his claim to put "America first" — and prioritizes clear U.S. interests over vague Russian promises or splashy headlines — Trump can avert disaster and claim a modicum of success. After all, the bar is low: All he has to do is avoid a deal that sets America back in preparations for Russia's next attack.