



No Trump cards for Moscow

by Nicu Popescu

“Life in Russia has never been as hard as under President Obama”. This humorous remark began circulating in Moscow in 2015 when US-Russia relations hit new lows over the crisis in Ukraine. Back then, Russian TV blamed the conflict in Ukraine and Russia’s own economic woes on the West, while vitriolic attacks against the US surpassed those seen even in Soviet times. Fearing that a Hillary Clinton presidency would likely be tougher than Obama, policymakers in Moscow were more than a little relieved when Donald Trump was elected.

Yet the chances now are that, in a few years, the joke may turn into “Life in Russia has never been as hard as under Obama – until Trump came to power”. This might have less to do with what Trump may do *vis-à-vis* his Russia policy than with the effects of other policies. Certainly the Putin-Trump relationship is something to keep an eye on. But what happens between the US and Russia depends not only on the personal chemistry between the two presidents, but also on what happens in Beijing, Tehran, rural Oklahoma (with its shale gas reserves) or in Romania (where a US anti-ballistic missile site is located).

With the Trump administration still settling in, much of the current analysis of future US-Russia relations is focused on Trump’s presumed instincts and intentions towards Moscow. Trump’s approach to Russia is indeed a source of hope for

some, and of fear for others. Clearly, President Trump and elements of his team have a substantial history of interaction with Russia. But this is shrouded in speculation, and conspiracy theories abound. At the same time, there are multiple factors inside the US administration and the wider US political establishment – let alone the well-tested system of checks and balances – that limit Trump’s potential overtures to Russia.

A less speculative subject of analysis is how Trump’s non-Russia related – and arguably less controversial – policy initiatives might impact on Russia. Trump’s approach to China, Iran, military spending and shale gas development could well have more of an impact on Moscow’s global posture than what Washington might say or do about Russia itself. In this broader context, there may be little for Putin to celebrate.

Words to words

To start with, Trump’s determination to increase defence spending will not go unnoticed in Moscow. The White House has already committed to a 10% increase for the next fiscal year. From a Russian standpoint, regardless of the state of relations with the US, a certain military balance needs to be maintained. And while good relations and intentions wax and wane, capabilities remain constant – and take a long time to develop. Increases in US defence spending will not only be a burden on the American taxpayer

but also the Russian one, since Moscow will be bound to keep its own defence spending at relatively high levels.

Furthermore, Trump's denunciation of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia as a "bad deal", as well as his apparent intention to boost investment in the nuclear sector and in anti-ballistic missile (ABM) capabilities, are likely to increase the pressure on Russia to spend more on its own nuclear arsenal and seek ways to counter US strategic missile defences. Regardless of any scepticism surrounding ABM systems, or how asymmetric (and thus cheaper) Russian responses might turn out to be, these moves will put further pressure on Moscow to spend more on its military.

In this context, growing tensions over Iran could also have an impact. Trump's warning that Iran is "playing with fire", the ratcheting up of US sanctions, Tehran's ballistic missile tests and a round of military exercises using the Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missile system all act as incentives for the White House to build up US anti-missile systems in central Europe, primarily in Romania (Deveselu) and Poland (Redzikovo). This would further complicate relations with Moscow and create additional pressures for Russia to develop costly responses – and all this against the background of a stagnant, barely-modernising domestic economy.

Trump's domestic energy policy is no more promising for Putin. The White House's 'America First Energy Plan' aims at loosening environmental regulations on shale gas and oil development in the US, opening up more federal land for oil drilling, and increasing domestic and Canadian oil supplies to the US market. All of this is likely to increase downward pressures on global oil and gas prices, again hitting Russian coffers and Moscow's capacity to sustain both the country's economy and its international ambitions.

Chinese dilemmas

For all their differences, what ultimately unites the Obama and Trump administrations is an appreciation of the need to focus more time and resources on China. Under Trump, the chances are that this 'refocusing' may lead to increased tensions. This would not be good news for Russia and would not bolster its bargaining power in either Beijing or Washington – quite the contrary.

Assuming some sort of US-Russia rapprochement materialises in the context of increased

US-China tensions, Washington would probably expect some favours from Moscow. Russia, however, views potential deals with the US as too volatile, and of itself as being too vulnerable *vis-à-vis* Beijing to even consider displaying the slightest show of solidarity with the US against China. Thus in any scenario involving increased US-China diplomatic tensions, Russia would probably try, at best, not to take sides. Such neutrality – both symbolic and practical – would not bode well for a second US-Russian 'reset' (after Hillary Clinton's one in 2009).

The same goes for Beijing. China already thinks that Moscow's own 'pivot' to Asia is a part-time, half-hearted activity and that Russia is looking for ways to re-engage with the West. Russian neutrality over any type of regional tensions would only confirm Beijing's view that Moscow is not a trustworthy partner on important foreign policy matters.

But even this Russian 'neutrality' might prove hard to achieve. Besides potentially 'neutral' diplomatic choreography, Russia also is under contractual obligation to supply China with sophisticated weapons which are altering the military balance in South-East Asia – including S-400 anti-aircraft systems (which could be supplied from 2018 onwards) and SU 35 aircraft (4 of which were delivered in 2016, 10 are to be sent in 2017, and 10 more in 2018). In the event of any real showdown between Washington and Beijing, Russia's fulfilment of its contractual obligations (potentially in the middle of a crisis) will certainly not be seen as neutral by the US. And suspending or delaying the delivery of weapon systems to China (as Russia did with S-300 supplies to Iran in 2010) is hardly an option.

Even if the friendliest dynamics develop between Trump and Putin (which is still far from certain), the feedback loop of Trump's policies towards China, Iran, energy and defence are likely to present Russia with a difficult dilemma; namely between seeking to counter such policies or accepting them. Countering them would send Russia back to where it was under Obama, but this time with a much more unpredictable administration. Accepting them, for the sake of stability with President Trump, is also not a particularly attractive option for Russia: this would certainly not help Moscow emerge any stronger at the other end of the Trump presidency.

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