

Trump, Putin, and the Future of US-Russian Relations

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Donald Trump's relations with Russia have been a drama in three acts. In Act One, leading up to the November election, candidate Trump was insisting that he would radically revise the role of the US in the world, and he saw forging a new partnership with Russia as part of that agenda. In Act Two, in the months after the election, Trump found himself under sustained attack as more information surfaced about Russian efforts to hack the election, together with the dubious Russian connections of some of his closest advisers. Then, in Act Three, after launching the missile strike on Syria on April 7, the Trump administration reverted to a more mainstream position on US foreign policy, including some harsh criticism of Russia for its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

After the roller coaster ride of the first few months of the Trump presidency, no-one can foresee the future course of US-Russian relations. This level of unpredictability has not been seen since the late 1980s, when it was not clear who would be running the Soviet Union a few months hence—or even, it turned out, whether there would be a Soviet Union at all.

The situation is not as volatile now as it was in 1991: the collapse of the Soviet Union was an epochal, seismic shift, on a scale not seen since 1945. However, what makes the current miasma different is that the uncertainty dogs *both sides* of the relationship.

On the Russian side, there are a series of imponderables. Does President Vladimir Putin intend to continue using military force, overt and covert, to destabilize neighboring states—not just Estonia or Latvia, but also Belarus or Kyrgyzstan? Will he try to hack and otherwise subvert upcoming elections in Germany and elsewhere? Is the Russian economy robust enough to sustain Putin's assertive foreign policy?

On the American side, we have the election of President Donald Trump. It is appropriate that a new biography of him in Russian is titled *Black Swan*.¹ The term “Black Swan” was introduced by Nassim Taleb to denote an event of low probability but high impact.² Trump is threatening to overturn long-standing principles of US foreign policy: the NATO alliance, free trade, and the defense of human rights; not to mention his disrespect for the basic tenets of the US constitution, such as an independent judiciary and a free press.

It might be useful to distinguish between *structural* and *contingent* factors. Three contingent developments worked in Putin's favor. First, President Viktor Yanukovich's rejection of an association agreement with the European Union in November 2013 led to the Maidan revolution in Kyiv, which in turn

1. Kirill Benediktov, “Chernyi lebed’: politicheskaiia biografia Donal’da Trampa,” *Livejournal*, November 5, 2016, at <http://el-murid.livejournal.com/2996255.html> (last accessed April 27, 2017).

2. Nassim Taleb, *Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York, 2010).

triggered Putin's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Second, the ongoing Syrian civil war gave Putin an opportunity to intervene militarily in September 2015. Third, the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 upended two decades of bipartisan consensus about US policies towards Russia. Before analyzing this sequence of events, this article will examine the structural factors at work.

Structural Shifts in the Global Balance of Power

The most salient structural development is the return of Russia to great power politics as an independent player. In the 1990s and early 2000s Moscow was carping from the sidelines, denouncing US policy from Kosovo to the Iraq war. But since 2008 we have seen a newly assertive Russia, willing to deploy military force in Georgia, Ukraine, and now Syria, while also engaging in new forms of hybrid war ranging from the deployment of mercenaries in the Donbas to hacking Democratic Party email servers in the US.

This new aggressiveness in turn rests on several factors. The Russian economy doubled in size between 2000–2008, while spending on the military increased threefold between 2000 and 2015, from \$28 billion to \$91 billion.³ Putin's political regime also shifted gear in 2011–2014, moving from a technocratic autocracy to a regime based on populist nationalism. This was partly driven by external developments— notably the color revolutions of 2003–05, followed by the Arab Spring of 2011, which evidenced, according to the Kremlin, a long-term US plan for “regime change” in countries deemed hostile to US interests, including Russia itself. This fear materialized in the protest movement that greeted Putin's return to the presidency in 2011–12.

The west did not know how to respond to this resurgent Russia. They tried diplomacy (Obama's abortive “reset” of 2009); economic leverage (the targeted sanctions after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014); and deterrence (stepping up NATO deployments to the Baltic region). Meanwhile, other structural factors were at work: the “decline of the west” and the rise of China. Europe never fully recovered from the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis, which revealed the imbalance between the economies of the northern and southern member states. The breakdown in trust engendered by the Greek bailout was exacerbated by new crises—the flood of refugees across the Mediterranean from North Africa and then from Syria and Iraq via Turkey, peaking at more than a million refugees in 2015. Then came the Brexit vote in June 2016.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 raised US prestige in the world, but Obama's policy of military withdrawal in Iraq and Afghanistan, followed by inaction in Syria, signaled that the US was stepping back from its role as a global leader in international crises. Hamstrung by a hostile Congress, Obama was unable to move forward on key issues in his global agenda, such as climate change. His much-vaunted “pivot to Asia” was met by a new Chinese assertiveness—building naval bases in the South China Sea.

3. *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, “SIPRI Military Expenditures Database,” at www.sipri.org/databases/milex (last accessed April 27, 2017).

The Syrian Gambit

A key turning point in the US retreat from global leadership was Obama's failure to act in Syria in August 2013, when the forces of President Bashar al-Assad killed 1,400 people in a Damascus suburb in a gas attack. A year earlier Obama had said that the use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line," triggering military retaliation.⁴ However, rather than initiate military action (such as declaring a no-fly zone, which would have required destroying Syrian air defenses), Obama deferred to Congress, which voted against the use of military force. That left an opening for Putin, who came up with a proposal to remove and destroy Assad's chemical arsenal, with US assistance. Assad's survival in power depended on Russian support, so he was forced to accede. Obama agreed, and the decommissioning was reportedly completed by June 2014, with 1,290 tons of chemicals incinerated on a US ship.⁵

This was a dramatic signal that the US was leaning back as a power in the Middle East, and Russia was leaning in. These trends were confirmed in September 2015 when Putin saved the Assad regime from imminent collapse by initiating air strikes against opposition forces. Eight times Russian diplomats have used their veto in the United Nations Security Council to protect the Assad regime from international sanctions. In December 2016 the main opposition stronghold of Aleppo fell to Assad's forces, triggering another humanitarian catastrophe.⁶ There are even signs that Russia is interested in getting involved in the Libyan civil war. The EU is negotiating with Russia to dissuade Moscow from backing General Khalifa Haftar, the warlord who controls eastern Libya in defiance of the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli.⁷

Putin now finds himself with some awkward allies in Syria—Turkey, Iran, and Hezbollah. In November 2015 Turkey shot down a Russian bomber, leading Russia to cut economic trade with that country. But after the attempted coup in July 2016 President Recep Erdogan needed all the friends he could get: he apologized for the shoot-down and patched up his relationship with Putin. Thanks to Russian aid, Assad is "winning" the war, but it remains unlikely that he will be able to regain control over the entire territory of Syria. Putin had promised a brief intervention—but eighteen months later Russia is still there. Indeed, in December 2016 Russian television proudly released footage of Russian special forces fighting house-to-house against radical Islamists in

4. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/ (last accessed April 27, 2017).

5. Naftali Bendavid, "Removal of Chemical Weapons from Syria is Completed," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2014, at www.wsj.com/articles/removal-of-chemical-weapons-from-syria-is-completed-1403529356 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

6. Peter Rutland, "Cries from Syria," *Transitions Online*, March 17, 2017, at www.tol.org/client/article/26782-syria-film-russia-putin.html (last accessed April 27, 2017).

7. Patrick Wintour, "EU Reaches out to Russia to Broker Deal with General Haftar," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2017, at www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/09/eu-russia-broker-libya-khalifa-haftar-libya-tobruk (last accessed April 27, 2017).

eastern Syria.⁸ In January 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran convened peace talks in Astana, at which the warring parties sat down together for the first time.⁹

Analysts scratched their heads to try to figure out what were Russia's strategic goals in Syria. It seemed a high price to pay to secure its "naval base" in Tartus, which prior to the conflict was basically a dozen guys and a gas pump. In January 2017, Russia signed a new 49-year lease on the base.¹⁰ The war provided a chance to test some of their new weapons systems in combat, and maybe attract a few new buyers—again, a fairly marginal benefit. Rather, it seems like prestige and geopolitics were at stake: Putin was keen to stand by his ally, Assad, to avoid yet another example of "regime change" through external intervention, and to signal that Russia was not just a regional player, capable of projecting power into neighboring countries in eastern Europe, but a global actor. Some argue that Putin's main objective is to work his way back into a partnership with the US, in the form of joint actions against ISIS. In which case, Donald Trump arrived at the perfect time.

The Arrival of Trump

Putin knew that cooperation with the US would be a remote prospect if Hillary Clinton won the White House. Secretary of State Clinton's relations with Putin got off on the wrong foot with the bungled "reset" exercise in 2009, and headed downhill from there. Putin by all accounts really believed that Clinton was trying to use the Bolotnaia protests in the winter of 2011–12 to bring about "regime change" in Moscow—and noted the same playbook in action in Ukraine in the winter of 2013–14. Putin saw Russia as locked in an ideological war with the US and was ready to unleash all the "soft power" tools in its arsenal to push back.¹¹ The rise of new digital media over the past decade has given Russia new opportunities to promulgate their "information war" through the likes of youtube (created in 2005) and Wikileaks (launched in 2006).

Meanwhile, Donald Trump emerged as the Republican presidential nominee, with many observers seeing parallels between Trump's populist nationalism and Putin's own political formula.¹² They are both political outsiders who

8. "Pod grifom sektretno. Rabota boitsev rossiiskikh sil spetsial'nikh operatsii v Sirii. Unikal'nye Kadry," YouTube video, 9:23, posted by *Rossiiia 24*, December 11, 2016, at [youtube.com/watch?v=zgkRcwxidbE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgkRcwxidbE) (last accessed April 27, 2017).

9. Martin Chulov, "The Message from Syria Summit: Russia Wants a Solution in its Name," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2017, at www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/24/the-message-from-syria-summit-russia-wants-a-solution-in-its-name (last accessed April 27, 2017).

10. Rod Nordland, "Russia Signs Deal on Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept Assad," *New York Times*, January 20, 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deal.html> (last accessed April 27, 2017).

11. Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, "The Limits of Russia's 'Soft Power,'" *The Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (October 2016): 395–413.

12. Michael McFaul, "We Can't Let Trump Go down Putin's Path," *Washington Post*, February 6, 2017, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/02/06/we-cant-let-trump-go-down-putins-path/?utm_term=.c960976919a2 (last accessed April 27, 2017); Michael McFaul, interview, "Former US Ambassador to Russia Talks Trump and

use the media to establish a direct connection with the masses.¹³ Trump himself made a string of positive comments about Putin.¹⁴ On December 18, 2015, in a TV interview with Joe Scarborough, Trump said of Putin: “He’s running his country and at least he’s a leader, unlike what we have in this country.” With respect to the murders of Putin’s opponents he said: “Our country does plenty of killing, also.” He later repeated this remark after he became president, in a TV interview with Bill O’Reilly on February 6.¹⁵ On October 9 he said: “I think it would be great if we got along with Russia because we could fight ISIS together.” (He repeated this point in two other interviews that year.) On several occasions Trump said that he knew Putin personally, but then denied it later.¹⁶

By all accounts, Putin (like everyone else) expected Clinton to win the November presidential election.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Putin did later boast in his annual news conference that “nobody but us believed that he would win.”¹⁸ Moscow could hardly believe its luck when Trump pulled out his upset victory. Whatever Trump was going to do, it could not be any worse than Clinton. Or at least that is what they thought.

The Hacking Scandal

On December 29, 2016, in the final weeks of his presidency, Barack Obama publicly accused Russia of trying to interfere in the US presidential election, and

Putin,” WBUR On Point Audio recording, 47:01, *National Public Radio*, February 9, 2017, at www.wbur.org/onpoint/2017/02/09/mcfaul-trump-putin-russia (last accessed April 27, 2017).

13. There are of course some important differences between the two men. Putin is an intelligent, well-informed product of Russia’s “deep state” who had been in power for 17 years before Trump took office.

14. Andrew Kaczynski, Chris Massie, and Nathan McDermott, “80 times that Trump talked about Putin,” *CNN*, at edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/03/politics/trump-putin-russia-timeline/ (last accessed April 27, 2017).

15. Evan McMullin, “Republicans, Protect the Nation,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2017, at www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/opinion/a-party-to-the-russian-connection.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&_r=0 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

16. Philip Bump, “Does Trump know Putin? A Chronology,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 2017, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/02/07/does-trump-know-putin-a-chronology/?utm_term=.c31e2b4b1949 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

17. Andrei Pertsev, “Why Kremlin Spin Doctors Will Regret Their Enthusiasm for Trump,” Carnegie Moscow Center, November 17, 2016, at carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=66177&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWVdFMk16QXdPRE5tWpFMSIsInQiOiI2QWNZUVJ3XC8wNFZxU0xRSnNVeWxEZU1LNTZRVlFMXC9JNVdUdmxzMjgrVWVwXC9NZnZcLzhjankzb05JNHVrQ3JqZFZodXk4MG81cVp1SnNzTkhKcVd3c1ZYOTlhZVJVUWRlEhpOb2cyTT1cL1wvZnZlK3ZKOHVlOW12YkFoWTBUQk9pXC9sIn0%3D (last accessed April 27, 2017).

18. “Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference,” *President of Russia Official Website*, December 23, 2016 at en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53573 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

expelled thirty-five Russian diplomats.¹⁹ On January 6, 2017, the US Director of National Intelligence issued a slender report outlining the case against Russia.²⁰ The report argued that Russian officials had sponsored the hacking of US political organizations with the aim of increasing Donald Trump's chances of victory in the presidential election, and was part of "Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order."²¹ The Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and National Security Agency all signed off on the report. While foreign governments have long sought to influence US government decision making on this or that issue of interest to them, it was unprecedented for the US to accuse a foreign power of directly interfering in the US electoral process. Congressional leaders set up an enquiry, led by the House Intelligence Committee, which held its first hearings on March 20, 2017.²²

The scandal initially broke in July 2016 when Wikileaks released 44,000 Democratic National Committee emails, some of them suggesting that the party's national officials had tried to subvert the prospects of Hillary Clinton's rival, Senator Bernie Sanders.²³ A steady stream of leaks over the ensuing months kept the story in the news right up until the election, including materials such as the texts of Clinton's private speeches to bankers. The FBI had first contacted the DNC to warn them of potential hacking as early as September 2015. The leaking was not confined to the presidential race: the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee had also been hacked, and documents leaked to embarrass Democratic candidates running in a dozen or so Congressional seats. The Obama administration publically blamed Russia for the leaks in the form of a October 7, 2016 statement by Director of National Security James Clapper and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson. But they did not provide much detail, and did not mention Putin by name. The public denunciation by President Obama after the election in December was too little, too late, and was dismissed by critics either as sour grapes from sore losers, or as a "red scare" conjured up to prevent Trump from improving relations with Russia.²⁴

19. Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, "Trump, Putin and the New Cold War," *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2017, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war (last accessed April 27, 2017).

20. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections," declassified version, January 6, 2017, available online at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf (last accessed May 3, 2017).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

22. There is web site devoted to tracking the Putin-Trump relationship, <http://putintrump.org>.

23. Michael Shear and Matthew Rosenberg, "Released Emails Suggest the D.N.C. Derided the Sanders Campaign," *New York Times*, July 22, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/us/politics/dnc-emails-sanders-clinton.html (last accessed April 27, 2017).

24. Nicolai Petro, "Blaming Russia Will Only Hold America Back," *The National Interest*, January 9, 2017 at nationalinterest.org/feature/blaming-russia-will-only-hold-america-back-18997 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

The NDI report released in January was, in the words of Kevin Rothrock of the *Moscow Times*, “deeply disappointing” to those who believe that Russian disinformation is a problem that needs to be taken seriously.²⁵ The report was poorly argued and thinly sourced. It contained no new information, and seven of its 12 pages were devoted to a report from 2012 about Russian propaganda efforts. For example, it takes at face value the claims by *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), the international television station created in 2005, for audience share, when it seems likely that *RT*’s purported one billion hits on youtube are largely driven by human interest stories or cat videos, hardly a threat to US national security.²⁶ They may also be boosted by paid trolls or automated bots pushing up the viewing figures in order to meet the Kremlin’s targets.²⁷ The release of confidential information from hacked communications that fed in to the mainstream US media is much more important than the antics of *RT*, and it is a pity that the DNI document conflated the two and emphasized the latter.

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange has insisted that the leaks did not come from Russian government sources, though his credibility is in shreds given his record of working with the Russian authorities, including hosting a show for *RT* in 2012 and advising NSA leaker Edward Snowden to seek asylum in Russia in 2013.²⁸ On August 6, 2016, *RT* published an English-language video called “Julian Assange Special: Do WikiLeaks Have the E-mail That’ll Put Clinton in Prison?”²⁹

The DNI claimed that the information it had proving Kremlin complicity in the leaking was too sensitive to reveal in the unclassified report. Some evidence surfaced in press coverage. The Crowdstrike cybersecurity firm, which had been commissioned by the Democratic National Committee, reported finding some malware from a hacking group that they called “Fancy Bear,” which they suspect is run by the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate).³⁰ The malware turned up both in the DNC hack and in the 2014 hacking of a Ukrainian Army

25. Kevin Rothrock, “American Unintelligence on Russia,” *Moscow Times*, January 7, 2017 at themoscowtimes.com/articles/american-unintelligence-on-russia-op-ed-56746 (last accessed April 27, 2017).

26. Robert Orttung, Elizabeth Nelson and Anthony Livshen, “How Russia Today is using YouTube,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2015, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/23/how-russia-today-is-using-youtube/?utm_term=.707dc7f8a63d (last accessed April 27, 2017).

27. Katie Zavadski, “Putin’s Propaganda TV Lies about Its Popularity,” *The Daily Beast*, September 17, 2015 at www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/17/putin-s-propaganda-tv-lies-about-ratings.html. (last accessed April 27, 2017).

28. Joe Becker and Stephen Erlanger, “How Russia Often Benefits when Julian Assange Reveals the West’s Secrets,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/europe/wikileaks-julian-assange-russia.html (last accessed April 27, 2017).

29. “Julian Assange Special: Do Wikileaks Have the Email That’ll Put Clinton in Prison? (EP 376),” YouTube video, 27:54, posted by *RT*, August 6, 2016, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2FfrNGcO3g (last accessed May 1, 2017).

30. Ellen Nakashima, “Cyberstrike Security Firm Finds Evidence That Russia Was Behind DNC Attack,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 2016, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cybersecurity-firm-finds-a-link-between-dnc-hack-and-ukrainian-artillery/2016/12/21/47bf1f5a-c7e3-11e6-bf4b-2c064d32a4bf_story.

artillery-targeting application written for Android phones by a Ukrainian officer and used by his colleagues.

“Fancy Bear” released some of the DNC emails through a supposedly independent hacker calling himself Guccifer 2.0 and the website DCLeaks.com. Another group, “Cozy Bear,” which independently hacked into the DNC, is seen as associated with the FSB (Federal Security Service).³¹ Cozy Bear broke into the DNC system first, in July 2015, and Fancy Bear followed in March 2016, although it was first to start publically releasing stolen material. A bizarre development then followed: two top officials in the FSB’s own cyberwarfare office were arrested in December 2016 and accused of treason for collaborating with the Shaltai-Boltai group that had been hacking Kremlin emails, and leaking information to the US.³²

The Dodgy Dossier

Another twist in the tale was the release by BuzzFeed on January 10, 2017 of unconfirmed reports from a former British intelligence official, Christopher Steele, whose firm Orbis Business Intelligence was hired to investigate Trump’s ties with Russia.³³ Steele was recruited by the D.C.-based *Fusion Research*, which had initially been commissioned by Trump’s Republican rival candidates, and then by the Clinton campaign. The reports cited gossip from unnamed Russian intelligence sources. They alleged sexual cavorting by Trump during his visits to Russia for the Miss Universe pageant in 2013 (incidents which, if they took place, would likely have been recorded by the FSB). These juicy speculations were manna to late night TV comedy shows, with Saturday Night Live being particularly masterful in pillorying Trump as the clueless puppet of a bare-chested Putin. In the “soft power” information war, Putin was losing.³⁴

On December 26, 2016 Oleg Erovinkin, a Rosneft official and former KGB general, was found dead in his car in Moscow. There were reports that he was suspected of helping Steele compile his dossier.³⁵ The Steele dossier also

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/russia-hack-election-dnc.html?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=Trending&version=Full®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

31. Eric Lipton, David Sanger and Scott Shane, “The Perfect Weapon: How Russian Cyberpower Invaded the US,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/russia-hack-election-dnc.html?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=Trending&version=Full®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

32. Ewa Hartog and Mikhail Fishman, “An American Cover Story for Russia’s Undercover Hackers,” *Moscow Times*, February 14, 2017, at themoscowtimes.com/articles/tinker-tailor-hacker-spy-57013 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

33. Scott Shane, Nicholas Confessore, and Matthew Rosenberg, “How a Sensational, Unverified Dossier Became a Crisis for Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2017, at www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-intelligence.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=a-lede-package-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news (last accessed May 1, 2017).

34. “Vladimir Putin Cold Open,” YouTube video, 4:05, posted by Saturday Night Live, January 22, 2017, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNK430YOiT4 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

35. Robert Mendick and Robert Verkaik, “Mystery Death of ex-KGB Chief Linked to MI6 Spy’s Dossier on Donald Trump,” *The Telegraph*, January 27, 2017,

discussed the Moscow business connections of Trump's Russia advisor Carter Page, and his March–August 2016 campaign manager, Paul Manafort. One of the most specific pieces of evidence to surface about possible Russian influence was the decision at the Republican National Convention in July 2016 to remove a pledge to provide military support to the Ukrainian government.³⁶ Manafort resigned from his post the next month, after a ledger surfaced in Kyiv documenting \$13 million in cash payments to Manafort when he was running Yanukovich's 2010 election campaign.³⁷ In March 2017, the *New York Times* revealed that Manafort had been paid \$10 million a year from 2006–09 by aluminum oligarch Oleg Deripaska to lobby for Russian interests.³⁸ In April 2017, the *Washington Post* reported that in July 2016 the FBI had obtained a warrant under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to monitor the communications of Carter Page, who had joined the Trump campaign as an informal policy advisor in March 2016.³⁹ Page, a low-ranking energy consultant, had had contacts with Russian intelligence officials dating back to 2013.

The anonymous informants in the dossier claimed that the Trump campaign knew about the DNC hacking from the Russians, and that intelligence sharing was a two-way street—in return, Moscow asked the Trump people to gather data on Russian oligarchs in the US. They also suggest that the Kremlin was getting cold feet about the hacking operation—fearful that Russia would incur the wrath of the US once the leaks were made public, especially if Hilary Clinton won the election. This swirling cloud of possible facts, half-truths, and lies is reminiscent of the Kremlinology of days past.

In a January 19, 2017 press conference, Putin defended Trump against the accusations in the dossier, describing it as a “complete falsification” put out by people who were “worse than prostitutes.”⁴⁰ Many Russians see intervention in US elections (which the Kremlin officially denies) as a legitimate response to the USA's own involvement in foreign elections in the name of spreading

at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/27/mystery-death-ex-kgb-chief-linked-mi6-spys-dossier-donald-trump/ (last accessed May 1, 2017).

36. Josh Rogin, “Trump Campaign Guts GOP's Anti-Russia Stance on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2016, at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-campaign-guts-gops-anti-russia-stance-on-ukraine/2016/07/18/98adb3b0-4cf3-11e6-a7d8-13d06b37f256_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.2418092ef349 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

37. Andrew Kramer and Mike McIntire and Barry Meier, “Secret Ledger in Ukraine Lists Cash for Donald Trump's Campaign Chief,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/08/15/us/politics/paul-manafort-ukraine-donald-trump.html (last accessed May 1, 2017).

38. Jeff Horwitz and Chad Day, “AP Exclusive: Before Trump, Manafort Worked to Aid Putin,” *AP*, March 22, 2017, at apnews.com/122ae0b5848345faa88108a03de40c5a (last accessed May 1, 2017).

39. Ellen Nakashima, Devlin Barrett, and Adam Entous, “FBI Obtained FISA Warrant to Monitor Trump Advisor Carter Page,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 2017, at www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fbi-obtained-fisa-warrant-to-monitor-former-trump-adviser-carter-page/2017/04/11/620192ea-1e0e-11e7-ad74-3a742a6e93a7_story.html?tid=pm_world_pop&utm_term=.781487ffc41c (last accessed May 1, 2017).

40. “Putin on Trump Rumours: ‘Russian Hookers are the Best!’” YouTube video, 5:59, posted by Inessa S, January 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvrOK-YEeSA> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

democracy, something that has been an official part of US foreign policy both during and since the Cold War—with Boris Yeltsin’s 1996 election often being cited as a case in point.⁴¹

The controversy was not confined to the election hacking, however. There were also many questions raised about possible business dealings between Trump associates, Russian oligarchs, and Russian officials. These are also part of the ongoing congressional (and FBI) investigations. At the same time, David Remnick of the *New Yorker* warned: “Although the evidence of Russian interference is convincing, it is too easy to allow such an account to become the master narrative of Trump’s ascent,” thereby exculpating Clinton and the Democratic Party for their failure to address the concerns of ordinary Americans.⁴² While the US media drowns in a tidal wave of clicktivism, mutual recriminations, and fake news, the Russian media remain tightly controlled and focused on serving the national interests as personified by Mr. Putin.

Turmoil in the White House

The scandal claimed its first victim on February 13, 2017, when Mike Flynn, Trump’s national security advisor, was forced to resign because he misled Vice President Mike Pence about his conversations with the Russian ambassador to the US on December 28, 2016.⁴³ On that same day, President Obama, then still in office, had slapped sanctions on the Russian intelligence community for their role in hacking Democratic Party servers. Intelligence officials gave transcripts of Flynn’s conversations to the Justice Department and they were published by *The Washington Post* on February 9, 2017.⁴⁴ Flynn was replaced by General Harold McMaster, a veteran of the counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq. In 2014–15 McMaster reportedly oversaw a review of Russian operations

41. According to Dov Levin, the US intervened in 81 elections in 45 countries 1945–2000, while the USSR intervened in 36. See: Shane Dixon Cavanaugh, “Election Interference? The US Has Done it in 45 Countries Worldwide,” *Vocativ*, December 30, 2016, at <http://www.vocativ.com/388500/election-interference-us-45-countries/> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

42. Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, “Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War,” *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2017, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war (last accessed May 1, 2017).

43. Maggie Haberman, Matthew Rosenberg, Matt Apuzo, and Glenn Thrush, “Michael Flynn Resigns as National Security Advisor,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2017, at www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/us/politics/donald-trump-national-security-adviser-michael-flynn.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=span-ab-top-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

44. Greg Milner, “National Security Advisor Flynn Discussed Sanctions with Russian Ambassador, despite Denials, Officials Say” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2017. www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/national-security-adviser-flynn-discussed-sanctions-with-russian-ambassador-despite-denials-officials-say/2017/02/09/f85b29d6-ee11-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.d1968572da22 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

in Ukraine, which warned that Russian military modernization represented a significant threat.⁴⁵

On March 2, 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions agreed to recuse himself from the justice department investigation into the election hacking, after it was revealed that he had misled the Senate judiciary committee in his confirmation hearing by failing to reveal his meetings with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kisliak. Flynn's demise made it much less likely that Trump would be able to launch a mold-breaking initiative, such as lifting the economic sanctions on Russia or recognizing Moscow's sovereignty over Crimea, since that would provide ammunition to Trump's critics (in both parties), who were pursuing investigations into the nature of the new president's ties to Russia. On the other hand, the turmoil in the White House also suggested that the US would be less able to respond to Russian actions, such as its deployment of the SSC-8 ground-launched cruise missile, which Washington considers a violation of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty.⁴⁶

Trump announced on December 12, 2016 that he would be nominating Exxon chief Rex Tillerson to be Secretary of State, a man with considerable experience in working with Putin and Rosneft head Igor Sechin on Exxon's projects in Russia. Indeed, Tillerson was awarded the Order of Friendship by Putin in 2013. One would assume from Tillerson's background that he would put economics ahead of political considerations and would thus favor a rapprochement with Russia.

Trump's choice as ambassador to the United Nations was Nikki Haley, a former governor of South Carolina with no foreign policy experience. She surprised observers by coming out with clear condemnation of what she called Russia's "aggressive actions" in East Ukraine, both in her confirmation hearing and in her first speech to the UN Security Council on February 2, 2017. She said: "Our Crimea-related sanctions remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine."⁴⁷ This contradicted earlier statements by Trump in which he suggested Russia could keep Crimea.⁴⁸ Trump himself then changed tack, tweeting on February 15, 2017 that "Crimea was TAKEN by Russia during the Obama Administration. Was Obama too soft on Russia?"⁴⁹

45. Bryan Bender, "The Secret US Army Study That Targets Moscow," *Politico*, April 14, 2016, at www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/moscow-pentagon-us-secret-study-213811?o=0&utm_source=CGI+Daily+Russia+Brief&utm_campaign=07538b1d81-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_02_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_814a2b3260-07538b1d81-281716701&mc_cid=07538b1d81&mc_eid=9a7f0ae42c (last accessed May 1, 2017).

46. Michael Gordon, "Russia Deploys Missile, Violating Treaty and Challenging Trump" *New York Times*, February 14, 2017, at www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/world/europe/russia-cruise-missile-arms-control-treaty.html?_r=0 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

47. "USA: Sanctions on Russia Will Remain until Russia Returns Crimea back to Ukraine," YouTube video, 2:05, posted by *NewsFromUkraine*, February 5, 2017, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=znFnXGn3nE4 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

48. Geoffrey Smith, "Russia's Grand Bargain Looks Dead," *Fortune*, February 15, 2017, at fortune.com/2017/02/15/trump-russia-policy-crimea-tillerson/ (last accessed May 1, 2017).

49. Donald Trump, Twitter post, February 15, 2017, 6:42 a.m., https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/831846101179314177?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

Trump had his first phone conversation with Putin on January 28, 2017, but it is not known what they discussed.

After taking office, Trump himself walked back some of his earlier isolationist policy pronouncements—such as questioning the value of NATO, the validity of the long-standing “One China” policy, and the Iran nuclear deal.⁵⁰ In a February 23, 2017 interview, Trump questioned the utility of the New Start Treaty, limiting the strategic arsenals of Russia and the US, which expires in 2021, complaining that the US has “fallen behind on nuclear weapon capacity.”⁵¹ Surely his cavalier attitude towards arms control, and his request to increase the Pentagon budget by \$54 billion, was not welcome news in Moscow.

The Trump administration was thus sending mixed signals during its first months in office. There was a mismatch between the team of ideological zealots that Trump has entrusted with making policy in the National Security Council and the career professionals charged with carrying it out. (This is true in economic policy just as much as in foreign policy.) It is impossible to predict how the struggle between these two groups will evolve, but the ouster of Flynn seemed like a major victory for the realists.⁵²

The ideologists are mainly driven by a deep-seated fear of “radical Islamic terrorism,” a term much favored by General Flynn. European leaders (including Russian President Vladimir Putin) avoid using the term, because it implies that Islam itself is central to the threat. The man Trump picked to replace Flynn, General Harold McMaster, advised Trump against the term.⁵³ Trump used it anyway in his address to Congress on February 28, 2017.⁵⁴ The fight against “Islamofascism” is at the heart of the world view of Trump’s top advisor, Stephen Bannon, who calls for a rallying of “traditionalists” to defend western civilization.⁵⁵ That sounds quite similar to the dominant strain in

50. Gerald Seib, “In Donald Trump’s Fourth Week, a Chance of a Reboot,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2017, at www.wsj.com/articles/in-donald-trumps-fourth-week-a-chance-for-a-reboot-1487000702?mod=djem_jjewr_PS_domainid (last accessed May 1, 2017).

51. “Trump Tells Reuters he Want to Expand Nuclear Arsenal, Make US ‘Top of the Pack,’” *CNBC*, February 23, 2017, at www.cnbc.com/2017/02/23/trump-tells-reuters-he-wants-to-expand-nuclear-arsenal-make-us-top-of-the-pack.html (last accessed May 1, 2017).

52. David Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Peter Baker, “Turmoil at the National Security Council, From the Top Down” *New York Times*, February 12, 2017 at www.nytimes.com/2017/02/12/us/politics/national-security-council-turmoil.html?action=click&contentCollection=Politics&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article (last accessed May 1, 2017).

53. Eliana Johnson, Michael Crowley, and Shane Goldmacher, “New NSC Chief Pushed Trump to Moderate his Language on Terrorism,” *Politico*, February 28, 2017. www.politico.com/story/2017/02/mcmaster-trump-terrorism-speech-235476 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

54. “Remarks by President Trump in Joint Address to Congress,” White House, February 28, 2017, at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/28/remarks-president-trump-joint-address-congress (last accessed May 1, 2017).

55. Henry Meyer and Onur Ant, “The Russian ‘Philosopher’ who Links Bannon, Putin, Turkey: Alexander Dugin,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 3, 2017, at www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-dugin-trump-putin-turkey-20170203-story.html (last accessed May 1, 2017).

the Putin regime's ideology since 2011. Sebastian Gorka, a British-Hungarian who worked for Bannon at Breitbart news, is deputy assistant to the president and the main anti-Islamist ideologue in the administration.⁵⁶ He has praised Trump's "pragmatic" approach to Moscow.⁵⁷

On the realist side, Trump appointed Jon Huntsman, former ambassador to China and presidential candidate, as ambassador in Moscow. The senior director for Russia in the National Security Council (NSC) is Fiona Hill, a Brookings Institution scholar who served on the NSC under Obama, and who is not seen as particularly sympathetic to Putin. The senior director for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counter-Proliferation is Christopher Ford, a Navy and State Department veteran who served in the George W. Bush administration. The top four deputies in the NSC include David Cattler, who serves as deputy assistant to the president for Regional Affairs, and who was Obama's National Intelligence Manager for the Near East. So we see continuity in some of the most important and sensitive branches of the National Security Council—those dealing with Russia, nuclear weapons, and the Middle East.

The U-turn over Syria

On April 4, 2017, Syrian aircraft used sarin gas to kill some eighty civilians in Khan Shaykhoun. Trump was profoundly moved by photographs of the victims, including what he called "beautiful babies." The next day he denounced the Syrian airstrikes, standing alongside King Abdullah of Jordan who happened to be visiting Washington. On April 7, as Trump was sitting down to dinner in Mar-a-Lago with President Xi Jinping, US forces hit the Syrian airbase Shayrat, from which the chemical attack had been launched, with fifty-nine cruise missiles. The Russian military had been given some notice, so as to avoid Russian casualties. Secretary Tillerson told journalists: "Clearly, Russia has failed in its responsibility to deliver on that commitment from 2013" (that is, the destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal). "So either Russia has been complicit or Russia has been simply incompetent in its ability to deliver on its end of that agreement."⁵⁸

Overnight, Trump's "America first" isolationist foreign policy had undergone a dramatic 180 degree turn. This stunning development exasperated and angered the Russians, some of whom accused Trump of "betrayal."⁵⁹

56. Eli Stokols, Bryan Bender, and Michael Crowley "The Husband-and-Wife Team Driving Trump's National Security Policy," *Politico*, February 13, 2017, at www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-national-security-gorka-234950 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

57. John Hayden, "Gorka: Trump 'Incredibly Pragmatic' About Relations with Russia," *Breitbart*, February 7, 2017, at <http://www.breitbart.com/radio/2017/02/07/gorka-trump-incredibly-pragmatic-relations-russia-iran/> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

58. Mark Landler, "For 2 Advisers, Syria Strike is a Chance to Step out of the Shadows," *New York Times*, April 7, 2017 at www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/world/middleeast/tillerson-mcmaster-syria-attack.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=b-lede-package-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

59. Corinne Seminoff, "'What a Shame': Trump's Supporters in Russia Feel Betrayed by Missile Strike," *CBC News*, April 7, 2017, at www.cbc.ca/news/world/russia-reacts-to-trump-airstrikes-1.4061364 (last accessed May 1, 2017).

Moscow announced a suspension of the “deconfliction” arrangement under which their military in Syria shared operational information with the US, although the communications were restored a week later. Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev wrote on Facebook that the strike left the US “on the verge of a military clash with Russia.”⁶⁰ Russian observers argued that the Syria strikes were simply a ploy to reverse Trump’s sliding popularity in the wake of the failure of health care reform and other setbacks. They portrayed a president under constant attack since inauguration by the press, bureaucracy, and opponents in Congress (in both parties).⁶¹

Tillerson went to Moscow on April 12, and at their meeting Lavrov complained of “Washington’s confusing and sometimes openly contradictory ideas on the entire range of bilateral and international issues.”⁶² He also claimed that Trump and Putin “Have agreed on . . . the creation of a broad counterterrorism coalition” during their January 28, 2017 phone call. After some uncertainty, Tillerson was granted a two-hour meeting with Putin. Trump himself still refrained from direct criticism of Putin, though he conceded on April 13 that the US is “not getting along with Russia at all” and relations between the two global powers are at an “all-time low.”⁶³ It seems President Trump merely intended the airstrikes to deter future use of chemical weapons, and has not changed his previous position that the removal of President Assad from power is not a vital US national interest.

These developments came as what pollster Valerii Fedorov calls a “cold shower” for Russian public opinion.⁶⁴ Between March and April 2017, the negative rating of Trump amongst Russians rose from 7% to 39%, while the positives fell from 38% to 13%. 34% of respondents still hoped for an improvement in relations, though that was down from 58% in March, and 38% expected no change. 16% thought a war with the US was possible—and 14% thought it had already started.

What Does the Future Hold?

What then are the prospects for the future trajectory of US-Russia relations? The investigations into the Russian hacking and the Trump campaign’s Russian ties will go on for months, fueling American antipathy towards Russia

60. Dmitrii Medvedev, Facebook post, April 7, 2017, 9:07am, Moscow, at <https://www.facebook.com/Dmitry.Medvedev/posts/10154257290791851> (last accessed May 5, 2017).

61. Dmitrii Drobnitskii, “Chto i pochemu ‘sluchilos’ s Trampom?,” *Vzgliad*, April 10, 2017 at <https://vz.ru/columns/2017/4/10/865638.html> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

62. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks at talks with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Moscow,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, April 12, 2017, at www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2725202?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_70vQR5KJWVmR&_101_INSTANCE_70vQR5KJWVmR_languageId=en_GB (last accessed May 1, 2017).

63. Julian Borger and Alec Lun, “Trump Declares US-Russia Relations May Be at ‘at All Time Low,’” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/12/us-russia-relations-tillerson-moscow-press-conference> (last accessed May 5, 2017).

64. “Amerika Trampa: I ne drug, i ne vrag. . .?,” *VCIOM*, Press-release #3352, April 17, 2017, at <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116158> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

and making it very difficult for President Trump to make any concessions to Moscow. Even before the Syrian reversal, the Russians themselves seemed to have given up on the idea of a grand bargain.⁶⁵ Around the time of Flynn's resignation in February, according to some reports, the Kremlin instructed the Russian media to cut back their favorable coverage of Trump. References to Trump in Russian media fell fourfold over the next two weeks.⁶⁶ Crucially, on February 12, *Rossia 1's* authoritative Sunday night news program, *Vesti Nedelyi*, played satirical clips of Trump from the American comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, and a segment making fun of his handshake.

One scenario is that Trump forges ahead and manages to make a deal with Putin. Russia wants the lifting of economic sanctions, recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea, and a pledge that Ukraine will not join NATO. There is not much that Putin can offer the US in return: acceptance of Ukrainian sovereignty over Donbas, a renewal of strategic nuclear weapons talks, and cooperation in the war against ISIS. Russia stands to gain a lot more than the US in any such bargain. Basically, Putin would be promising not to behave badly—not to invade any more countries, not to violate arms control treaties, not to buzz NATO ships and aircraft on patrol.⁶⁷

Alternatively, one can imagine a continuation of the status quo, with the US keeping up its efforts to contain Russia. For example, a March 2017 report from the Council on Foreign Relations called for more reassurance of NATO allies and threats of asymmetric responses to Russian aggression.⁶⁸ According to this pessimistic interpretation, Putin needs an assertive foreign policy to maintain his domestic legitimacy—especially with a presidential election upcoming in 2018. So he cannot afford to step back from the positions he has staked out in Syria and Ukraine. Contrary to that argument, one can point to Putin's 80% plus approval rating: there is no sign that the "Crimea effect" is decaying over time, so Putin might not need any more foreign adventures.⁶⁹

The Washington mainstream, as represented by a report from the Carnegie Endowment, would prefer a middle position between these two extremes—neither appeasement nor confrontation, but selective engagement on issues where the interests of the two sides coincide.⁷⁰ Similarly, Thomas Graham and

65. Kathrin Hille, "Moscow Resets Expectations as Disorder Reigns in Washington," *Financial Times*, February 16, 2017, at <http://macaudailytimes.com.mo/files/pdf2017/FT-2746-2017-02-20.pdf> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

66. "Russian TV News Has Reduced Trump Coverage by Four Times in Two Weeks," *Moscow Times*, February 20, 2017, at <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-tv-news-has-reduced-trump-coverage-by-four-times-in-two-weeks-57213> (last accessed May 1, 2017).

67. Peter Rutland, "The Petty Bargain: Trump, Putin and the Future of US-Russia Relations," *The Interpreter*, February 27, 2017, at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/petty-bargain-trump-putin-and-future-us-russia-relations (last accessed May 2, 2017).

68. Kimberly Marten, "Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2017, at www.cfr.org/nato/reducing-tensions-between-russia-nato/p38899 (last accessed May 2, 2017).

69. Denis Volkov, "Dolgosrochnyi Effekt Kryma," *Vedomosti*, March 17, 2017, at www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/03/17/681693-dolgosrochnii-effekt (last accessed May 2, 2017).

70. Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Andrew Weiss, "Trump and Russia: The Right Way to Manage Relations," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017): 12–19, at

Matthew Rojansky, writing in *Foreign Policy*, argued that Russia can neither be democratized nor defeated.⁷¹ The important thing is to reopen channels of communication to avoid the risk of accidental nuclear war. While the Obama administration had tried to compartmentalize issues, Russia will insist on linkage across policy areas.

Meanwhile, there is little sign that the daily stream of scandals and revelations from the White House will let up anytime soon.

carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/13/trump-and-russia-right-way-to-manage-relationships-pub-67995 (last accessed May 2, 2017).

71. Thomas Graham and Matthew Rojansky, "America's Russia Policy Has Failed," *Foreign Policy*, October 13, 2016, at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/13/americas-russia-policy-has-failed-clinton-trump-putin-ukraine-syria-how-to-fix/> (last accessed May 2, 2017).