9 QUESTIONS ABOUT RUSSIA YOU WERE TOO EMBARRASSED TO ASK

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Vladimir Putin and the nation he leads lurked in the background of the 2016 campaign for months and months, perhaps even shaping the outcome of the race. And now Putins preferred candidate, Donald Trump, appears ready to embrace him as an ally — a stunning shift in US-Russia policy.

This is a source of growing alarm among cosmopolitan-minded liberals. Putin is bad, they say, and so are the European far-right parties that are aligning with him a multicontinental alliance undergirded by Islamophobic politics that alarms respectable opinion throughout the West.

And among political elites there really is a fairly firm consensus that this is, in fact, bad. Americas military leaders have repeatedly called Russia the greatest threat to the US-led world order. Among Republicans, its the ones focused on national security who put up the greatest resistance to Trump, and since the election hes gotten more pushback from Senate Republicans on the Russian hacking issue than on anything else. Hillary Clintons campaign clearly sought to make hay out of this, arguing that Trump would be Putins puppet.

But the mass public is relatively indifferent to foreign affairs and mostly doesnt seem to care about this. Foreign policy is the classic sort of issue that doesnt matter in politics until something goes badly wrong, at which point it starts to matter a lot.

National security leaders across the spectrum worry, with good reason, that the kind of friendly arrangement Trump seems to want to make with Russia would only shift the ratchet and end up involving the United States in more direct military engagements in Europe that wed rather not put to the test.

But the Cold War has been over for a long time, and both the US-Russian relationship and Russias approach to Europe have changed while most Americans werent paying attention. Here, then, is an attempt to answer some of your most basic questions about the contemporary US-Russian relationship and where it might head in the Trump era.

1) What is Russia?

As you have probably seen on a map (especially a misleading Mercator projection), Russia is an extremely large country that occupies the eastern third of Europe plus the entire northern part of Asia. And while the Russian nation and culture are very old, dating back in a broadly recognizable form to the adoption of Orthodox Christianity by East Slavic tribes in the 10th century, the modern Russian state is very new, arising, legally speaking, from the legal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991.

The Soviet Union itself was a federal state composed of 15 constituent republics constituted roughly along ethnic lines. But importantly, the ethnic subdivisions were themselves highly imperfect. They featured substantial minority populations especially around the Caucasus Mountains and in Siberia. Simultaneously, large Russian minority populations lived in most of the 14 other Soviet Republicans, and since Russian was far and away the primary language of the Soviet Union, there were substantial trends toward Russificiation of the local population in many of the other republics. Last but by no means least, as is often the case, the boundary-drawing process did not conform particularly well to the linguistic facts on the ground. There is a Tajik minority in Uzbekistan, a bigger Uzbek minority in Tajikistan, and both Uzbek and Kazakh minorities in Kazakhstan.

Since the Soviet Union was, from the beginning, governed by a highly authoritarian regime, the substance of Soviet federalism was not enormously significant as a practical matter. The republics were administrative subdivisions, not genuine semi-sovereign federal entities with autonomous powers or real ability to check the central government. But after the Soviet Union broke up, Soviet federalism became enormously important since each of the 15 constitutive republics immediately became a sovereign independent state.

But while the modern country of Russia is, legally speaking, the successor to the Russian SFR, it is also in many ways the successor to the old Russian Empire that preceded the Soviet Union (that they are both called Russia is a good hint). On the eve of World War I, the czars rule extended across virtually 100 percent of what would later become the Soviet Union, plus contemporary Finland and the main part of whats today Poland.

This old empire had administrative subdivisions, but they did not correspond closely to the Soviet scheme and, obviously, did not include Russia as a subdivision, since the whole thing was called Russia. The world war, the Russian Revolution, and the subsequent Russian Civil War caused the loss of Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and the transformation of the remaining empire into the Soviet Union.

Both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire were big, multiethnic states, most of whose residents were Russian and whose official language was Russian. Indeed, due to the loss of European territory and population, the USSR was more Russian than the Russian Empire was. But Soviet officials chose to create a new, smaller Russia inside the USSR that was nonetheless still a big multiethnic entity.

Critically, when Communist Party rule over the Soviet Union collapsed, it was not replaced with a new regime ruling across the entire Soviet Union. Instead, the political entity collapsed, turning the smaller Russia into an independent state surrounded by former Soviet republics that Russian officials came to refer to as their near abroad and continue to regard as part of Moscows legitimate sphere of influence — just as it was under the thumb of Imperial and Soviet Russia.

2) Why is the US-Russian relationship so fraught?

The $7.2 million check that bought Alaska. Public domain

The US-Russian relationship wasnt always bad, of course. Colonial America had a small trading relationship with Russia, and when the American Revolutionary War broke out, Russia maintained a posture of armed neutrality that in a practical sense advantaged the American side by

subverting British efforts to stamp out American commerce. According to Frank Golders research on Catherine the Great and the American Revolution, the czar never for a moment doubted that complete separation from the mother-country was the only solution, and she repeatedly offered her services as a mediator who could facilitate a peace agreement on the basis of independent.

Relations with Russia remained broadly friendly in the days of the early republic. During the great crisis of the American Civil War, when Britain and France often seemed eager to intervene on behalf of the Confederacy, the Russian government took a pro-Union line, and some researchers like Lincoln biographer and scholar of the US-Russian relationship Benjamin Platt Thomas believe Russian diplomacy played an important role in deterring Anglo-French intervention.

Russia had, at the time, a very contentious relationship with Britain related to Russias southern expansion in the direction of various elements of the British colonial empire. The czars regarded a strong United States as a useful counterweight to Britain. Similar considerations led, in 1867, to the sale of Alaska to the United States. The Russians had determined they had no feasible way to defend Alaska from an Anglo-Canadian invasion in the event of war with Britain, so they decided they might as well unload it for some cash to a country that could keep it out of British hands.

By the early 20th century, both Russia and the United States had improved their relationships with Britain and France Russia to the point of going to war alongside them against Germany and Austria in World War I. The United States joined the war on the Allied side in 1917, by which point the czarist regime had already collapsed under the pressure induced by poor military performance. Russias new aspirations to a republican form of government seemingly eliminated the main ideological obstacle to a friendly US-Russian relationship while making the two countries allies in war.

Then came Lenins October Revolution, in which his Bolshevik faction seized power, took Russia out of the war, and began articulating an ideological vision that entailed the overthrow of essentially every government in the world. The revolution led into the civil war that continued after the Allied victory in World War I, which pitted the new Bolshevik regime against various White armies and ethnic separatist groups. The United States backed some White groups with steps up to and including the dispatch of a 40,000-strong invasion force to the Russian Pacific port city of Vladivostok, while a smaller group joined French, British, and Italian troops in the Arctic Sea port of Arkhangelsk.

This episode is not well-remembered in the West, but the White forces came reasonably close to winning at one point before the ultimate Bolshevik victory. American forces withdrew from Russia by 1920, but US-Soviet relations remained poor, and the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations all refused to recognize the Bolshevik regime. It was not until about a year into Franklin Roosevelts term in office that the US established diplomatic relations with the USSR. A few years later, World War II made the US and the USSR allies, but the end of the war turned them into fierce competitors in a decades-long, globe-spanning Cold War.

The Cold War itself is conventionally seen as having ended in the 1989-1991 period when communist regimes collapsed in Eastern Europe. But the Cold War was a multifaceted conflict, and the Russian viewpoint is that the United States essentially never stopped waging it continuing efforts to roll back Russian influence long after Russia gave up its dreams of global communist revolution.

3) But whats the dispute about, exactly?
A good way to look at it would be to look back to the 1990s, when Bill Clinton was president of the United States and Boris Yeltsin was president of Russia.

Russia was extremely weak at this point, with its economy reeling from the legacy of communism, some badly botched privatization programs, and a global slump in oil prices. The Warsaw Pact the military alliance that kept Eastern Europe under Soviet control had been disbanded. But its Cold War rival NATO, a military alliance formed in 1948 for the explicit purpose of countering Soviet power, did not disband. On the contrary, it expanded to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, with preliminary talks underway for other post-communist countries to join the club.

The United States also intervened militarily, twice, against Russias traditional ally Serbia, first over Serbias conduct in the Bosnian civil war and the second time over its treatment of Albanian-speaking separatists in Kosovo. Under George W. Bush, NATO expanded further to include Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and even more provocatively the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

Concurrently, Russian power recovered considerably. New President Vladimir Putin set about constructing a political system that, though authoritarian, at least featured the kind of capable and functional state institution that often lacked under Yeltsin. Oil prices were generally high, and the Russian economy reconstituted itself as a natural resources exporter. At the same time, the US invasion of Iraq badly hurt Americas international prestige and caused dissension among Western allies.

As Leon Aron, who directs Russia studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, has written, Putinism is essentially a reaction to this experience. Putins agenda and political appeal are based on something that the pro-democracy revolutionaries of the late 1980s and early 1990s tended to disregard: the deep-seated trauma from the loss of their countrys exceptional status and mission that millions of Russians had believed in. Putin and many other Russians who are perfectly happy to see communism go were nonetheless Soviet and then Russian patriots saddened by Moscows decline in global influence under Gorbachev and then Yeltsin. Putins agenda, globally speaking, is to reassert Russias influence on the world stage.

Thats embroiled Russia in two sharp conflicts with the Obama administration. One is over Ukraine, which elected a pro-Western government in 2014 that prompted a Russian invasion of portions of the country with closer linguistic and cultural ties to Russia. The other is in Syria, where since last fall Russia has deployed warplanes and attack helicopters to help the regime beat back rebel forces. Its also led Russia to embark on a wide array of information operations foreign language broadcasts, propaganda websites, hacking, etc. aimed at breaking up the political consensus in the West in favor of expanding NATO and checking Russian expansion.

4) How powerful is Russia?
Putins Russia is a significantly stronger country than the Yeltsin-era version, but its nothing close to being a peer of the United States of America. Obama made this point in his final presidential press conference, arguing that the Russians are a smaller country, they are a weaker country, their economy doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy except oil and gas and arms. They don't innovate.

This is an argument Obama grew accustomed over the years to wielding against GOP Russia hawks in the pre-Trump years, to make the case against excessive alarmism. And its true as far as it goes.

Russia is larger than the United States in territorial extent, but it has less than half of Americas population. At market exchange rates, Russias GDP is a little smaller than Korea and a bit bigger than Australia. Adjusted for cost of living, Russia does better coming out between Germany and Brazil. But on either account, its much too weak and poor at this point to dominate Europe, much less overawe the United States on a global basis.

Yet while Obamas critique of the Russian economy is accurate, there is actually some strength in this market structure. A typical advanced economy relies, to an extent, on good relations with the other main countries in order to keep supply chains running and export markets open. A breakdown in US-China relations, for example, would be devastating to big companies in both countries. Because Russia is basically just selling fungible commodities into a big global marketplace, it has much more scope to thumb its nose at international opinion, something unsavory regimes in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and elsewhere also take advantage of. Russia also has the key external trappings of great power status, including a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, an advanced space program, and, of course, a large nuclear arsenal.

None of this gives Russia a comparable strength to the United States, but it does mean that its difficult to stop Russia from throwing its weight around. Russia can veto UN resolutions, is relatively immune to economic pressure, and cant be directly attacked without risking catastrophe.

5) Were already 2,000 words in — how about a song to lighten the mood?
Russia is famous for its contributions to global high culture over the years, particularly in terms of novelists and classical composers. But when I was living in Nizhny Novgorod in the summer of 1998, the big hit was Ruki Vverhs Pesenka (La La La).

This was a particularly low point for Russia during a broadly bleak decade, as Yeltsins government found itself defaulting on Russias external debt, leading to a collapse in the value of the ruble. Inflation reached 87 percent, several banks failed, and Yeltsin and the liberal reformists who dominated Russian policymaking in the mid-1990s suffered a collapse in political support from which they never recovered.

A couple of years later, the German band ATC covered the song with English lyrics and turned an obscure Russian pop tune into an international megahit. Consider it a metaphor for the combination of underlying strength and outward humiliation that Russia suffered in the late Yeltsin years.

6) What did Russia do to help Trump win, and why?

The US intelligence community, with no apparent dissent from foreign intelligence services, has judged it highly likely that the Russian government was behind the hacks of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chair John Podesta that led to the publication of internal emails by WikiLeaks. There is some disagreement internally about the extent to which the release of these documents was specifically intended to help Trump win the election, or more generally intended to sow chaos and/or discredit Hillary Clinton.

Whats clear is that from very early on in the campaign long before anyone on either side of the Atlantic viewed Trumps election as a realistic possibility the Russian foreign policy establishment was very alarmed by Clinton.

Fyodor Lukyanov, chair of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a semi-official policy organization in Moscow, told Vox back in 2015 that from the Russian governments perspective, Hillary is the worst option of any president, maybe worse than any Republican. Lukyanov felt that Clinton would pursue a more hawkish approach to Russia than Obama, citing the fact that as she was preparing to step down as Obamas secretary of state, she made a couple of statements without being diplomatic anymore. Statements about Russia, about this re-Sovietization of post-Soviet space, about Putin, that demonstrated her real feelings.

And, indeed, on the campaign trail, Clinton validated these sentiments by calling for escalation of US support for anti-Assad rebels in Syria.

This all gave Russia ample grounds to dislike Clinton and to seek to harm or embarrass her. But virtually everyone in Republican Party politics had spent years lambasting Obama as too weak on Russia, calling for more forceful intervention in Syria, the provision of more weapons to the Ukrainian government, and perhaps even further NATO expansions. This all gave Russia little reason to think in terms of a specifically partisan intervention, until Trump erupted on the scene offering a variety of Russia-friendly viewpoints. Moscow has been courting various populist-right movements in Europe the French National Front, the Italian Five Star Movement, the Austrian Freedom Party, etc. — for years, so adding Trump to the stable isnt that much of a stretch.

7) Why does Trump like Putin?

Donald Trumps initial statements praising Vladimir Putin were widely seen as a kind of campaign gaffe. Back in 2014, it was common for Republicans to compliment Putin as a way of criticizing Obama by arguing that the American president was being duped or outsmarted.

Putin is playing chess, House Intelligence Committee Chair Mike Rogers (R-MI) said, and I think were playing marbles. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), meanwhile, said that Putin played us perfectly over Ukraine, contrasting his savvy leadership with the naive Obama.

Trump did not have much real grounding in the American conservative movement, and, as Dara Lind writes, he frequently stumbled during the campaign when trying to nail the lingo. Oftentimes, Trump is merely trying to express an orthodox conservative view but instead ends up saying something that lots of Americans find brutal and extreme.

Over time, Trumps statements and actions about Russia policy became too intense and repetitive to be dismissed in this way. He specifically endorsed Russian intervention in Syria, his team changed the GOP platform to stop calling for the arming of the Ukrainian government, he called Americas commitment to NATO into question, he dismissed intelligence community findings about Russian hacking, and he expressed an aspiration for improved US-Russian relations.

Many liberals see this as essentially evidence of Trumps authoritarian tendencies, a natural affinity between a would-be dictator and an actual one. Others take a more conspiratorial view, and think Trump must be on the Kremlin payroll or perhaps is being blackmailed with some kompromat.

All of this is possible, but its worth emphasizing that Russophilia is not a Trump-specific phenomenon its something he shares with anti-immigration populists across the West, suggesting a fundamental grounding in ideology. Peter Beinart frames this as a divide between ideological and civilizational conservatives. To put it less politely, what Trump has in common with both Putin and European far-right leaders is that they dont like Muslims very much.

This sentiment has certainly long been present among rank-and-file members of the Republican Party voting base, and a kind of lazy conflation of a single, coherent Islamic enemy helps explains how the invasion of Iraq was sold to the public. But the official ideology of the conservative movement is rather different. George W. Bush went out of his way to rhetorically distance al-Qaeda from the Islamic mainstream, while Trump and like-minded figures on the right describe Islam itself as a hostile force, and view ordinary Muslims as guilty of jihadist sympathies until proven innocent.

Russia has a very large Muslim minority population, which stands at more than 10 percent and growing. And as the Wilson Centers Denis Sokolov has detailed, its subject to fairly harsh repression. This in part reflects a legitimate move to counter terrorism and extremist violence, but in large part is simply a mechanism of social control that plays out in the larger context of Putins repression of civil society. Islamic groups, whether in Russia proper or in Russian-aligned former Soviet republics in Central Asia, either enjoy state backing or else find themselves castigated as terrorists.

Whatever else draws Trump and Putin together, its important to see that there is an element of a shared ideological vision, grounded in Islamophobic politics, that connects Trumpism, Putinism, and many European populist movements.

8) Is it hypocritical for Americans to complain about Russian meddling?
Certainly the United States has its own decent track record of intervening in foreign countries politics, often up to and including directly fomenting coups against disfavored foreign leaders.

A more direct analogue to current Russian behavior, as Ishaan Tharoor wrote in October, was American efforts to block leftist coalitions from scoring electoral victories in Western Europe especially Italy — in the late 1940s:

In the late 1940s, the newly established CIA cut its teeth in Western Europe, pushing back against some of the continent's most influential leftist parties and labor unions. In 1948, the United States propped up Italy's centrist Christian Democrats and helped ensure their electoral victory against a leftist coalition, anchored by one of the most powerful communist parties in Europe. CIA operatives gave millions of dollars to their Italian allies and helped orchestrate what was then an

unprecedented, clandestine propaganda campaign: This included forging documents to besmirch communist leaders via fabricated sex scandals, starting a mass letter-writing campaign from Italian Americans to their compatriots, and spreading hysteria about a Russian takeover and the undermining of the Catholic Church.

We had bags of money that we delivered to selected politicians, to defray their political expenses, their campaign expenses, for posters, for pamphlets, recounted F. Mark Wyatt, the CIA officer who handled the mission and later participated in more than 2½ decades of direct support to the Christian Democrats.
These days, American political interventions are generally lower-key and more transparent operating through organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy and the US Agency for International Development. And the official purpose is to support democracy and democratic institutions, rather than particular parties or sides.

But the actual line can be fuzzy. As Joel Brinkley reported for the New York Times in 2004, Russian leaders, many Ukrainians and even some members of Congress are asking whether the $58 million the United States spent to promote democracy in Ukraine over the past two years was actually intended to oust the government there. Certainly the perception in Russia was that both the 2003 Rose Revolution in the former Soviet republic of Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine that ousted pro-Russian leaders in favor of pro-NATO Western leaders were the beneficiaries of US assistance.

By somewhat the same token, Putin himself personally blamed Hillary Clinton for inciting anti-government protests after Russias 2011 parliamentary elections.

Modern-day authoritarian regimes typically do hold regular elections, in part to cloak themselves in the legitimacy that electoral politics provides. This means that opposition politics itself is often organized around elections (as opposed to, say, violent revolution) and post-election protest movements. Since Russia really is an authoritarian state and really does have a network of alliances with authoritarian regimes in neighboring states, its not really possible to draw an unequivocal line between the United States meddling in foreign elections and the United States supporting democratic institutions and human rights abroad.

You dont need to take the Russian governments narrative about this at face value to see that in practice, American foreign policy always mixes geopolitical and humanitarian concerns. Protests against the Syrian regime are viewed differently from protests against the regime in Bahrain because the United States has different relationships with the regimes in question. American efforts to promote democracy in post-communist Europe are sincere. But that doesnt mean they arent also part of a concerted effort to draw countries into a NATO/EU security and economic architecture whose expansion benefits Washington and hurts Moscow.

Russia trying to boost the fortunes of populist politicians wholl bust up the existing Western foreign policy consensus isnt the precise mirror image of the US approach to Eastern Europe, any more than RT is exactly the same as Voice of America or the BBC, but there is at least a family resemblance.

9) What would a US-Russian alliance look like?
Trump has not really outlined a substantive vision for US-Russian foreign policy beyond the vague observation that it would be really nice if the US and Russia got along better. But Trumps choice

for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, is an official member of Putins Order of Friendship and as CEO of Exxon Mobil has lobbied extensively for removal of American sanctions on Russia.

Tillerson would, personally, profit enormously from the United States making unilateral concessions on this front.

Trump also seems inclined to cease US support for anti-regime rebels in Syria.

From the standpoint of the American national security establishment, the big problem with these ideas is that in exchange for unilateral concessions from the United States, Russia would give us nothing. Its true that ending sanctions on Russia would be beneficial to some American banks and fossil fuel extraction companies that could make more money if they could go back to doing business with Putin. But Americas military officers and diplomats worry that making unilateral concessions to Russia would invite further aggressive moves in Eastern Europe, including vis-à-vis countries like Estonia and Poland that we are obligated to defend under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Trump has hinted in the past that he may not feel like living up to Americas obligations in this regard, so maybe he doesnt worry about the possible knock effects of appeasement in Ukraine.

But it is somewhat difficult to project forward what, exactly, a US-Russian partnership could look like. A broad anti-Islamic coalition makes a certain amount of emotional and ideological sense, but it doesnt have a clear practical upshot. Trump has promised, for example, to get tough with Iran, which is Russias key ally in the Syrian civil war. And if Trump helps Assad deliver a decisive win in Syria, Hezbollah forces that are currently engaged in the war there will be free to return to Lebanon and reignite conflict with Israel.

More fundamentally, while Putin is surely eager to gain concessions from the United States, an enduring partnership is probably at odds with Putins goals.

Both Bush and Obama took office desiring an improved relationship with Russia only to see things unravel over the reality that in important ways, Putin doesnt want an improved relationship. Making Russia Great Again means trying to restore it to the position of near equality with the United States that it held in the heyday of the Cold War. As long as Russia remains clearly smaller, poorer, and weaker than the United States which it very much does a partnership would be on unequal terms and would in important respects undermine the purpose of Russian foreign policy.

Kaynak/Source: