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## **CAN TRUMP RESET TIES WITH RUSSIA?**

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Stanly Johny  
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When I am President, Russia will respect us far more than they do now and both countries will, perhaps, work together to solve some of the many great and pressing problems and issues of the WORLD! Donald Trump tweeted on January 7, weeks before he took over as the 45th President of the United States. Throughout his campaign, Mr. Trump praised Russian President Vladimir Putin for his leadership. Mr. Putin was one of the first leaders he reached out to after taking office. In a telephone conversation on January 28, both leaders promised cooperation in fighting terrorism. Interestingly, Mr. Trumps offer to rescript ties with the former Cold War rival comes at a time when bilateral relations are at the lowest level since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Obama administration imposed sanctions on Russia for its military intervention in Crimea and alleged interference in the U.S. election. The U.S. intelligence community has repeatedly slammed Moscow over a number of issues, from spreading instability in the world to killing civilians in Syria. So Mr. Trumps outreach stands in sharp contrast with the policies pursued by his predecessor(s). Why should he promise a reset in the first place?

Why reach out?

One explanation, which gained currency in the weeks after the presidential election, is that the Russians have some leverage over the new U.S. President. According to American media reports, the Central Intelligence Agency has concluded that Russia interfered in the U.S. election to help Mr. Trump win. Another allegation is that Russia possesses some compromising personal information about Mr. Trump which it could use to blackmail him. Irrespective of the merit of these allegations, its hard to believe that the President of the worlds most powerful country would be loyal to a foreign government just because it leaked information about his rival, or he could be blackmailed over some secret information.

For a logical explanation, one has to set aside these theories of loyalty and blackmail and look into the broader ideological and strategic contexts. Mr. Trumps foreign policy-related statements from his early campaign days can be divided into three broad themes: an ideological opposition towards what he calls radical Islamic terrorism, improving ties with Russia, and taking on China. These three themes are somehow interlinked.

Mr. Trump has never shied away from asserting his own, or his countrys, religious identity. During the campaign, he had said he would fight to bring Americans together as one people under one god saluting one American flag. In the words of Steve Bannon, Mr. Trumps chief strategist and one

of the most powerful voices in the administration, the Judeo-Christian West is in an outright war against jihadist Islamic fascism. The early decisions of President Trump, including a complete ban on visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries, indicate that the administrations world view and Mr. Bannons are not entirely different. On the other side, in Mr. Putins Russia, the Orthodox Church, sidelined by the godless communists for decades, has made a big comeback. So when Mr. Trump promises to win over the Russian leadership in the fight against the Islamic State, hes actually referring to a possible ideological alliance between two predominantly Christian countries against a common enemy. By doing so, Mr. Trump may be hoping to make advances in another direction — tackling China.

Mr. Trump believes Russia is no longer the U.S.s principal global rival. In his world view, China is rising to that stature. To be sure, Russia, with its enormous land and natural resources and strategically important geography and military might, remains a key geopolitical power. But its economy is inherently weak, a shadow of the Soviet economic power. Though Russia retains huge influence in its backyard, its doubtful whether it alone could pose a long-term strategic threat to the U.S. On the other side, China is an economic powerhouse that wields enormous influence around the world. But Chinas force-projection capabilities are limited as its seafront remains vulnerable. The U.S. has massive military presence in the Chinese sphere of influence. But if Russia and China come together — which has actually been taking place in recent years, be it in trade and economic ties or the collaboration at the United Nations on global conflicts — that would pose a potential threat to long-term American interests. Mr. Trump would like to use his overtures to Russia to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing.

This is a strategy his predecessors used several times in the history of American foreign policy. In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon wanted to exploit the differences in the Communist world and overhauled Americas policy towards China. In recent years, President Barack Obama seized the opportunity in Ukraine to mobilise European opinion against Russia and open a joint front against Moscow. While his sanctions regime didnt necessarily weaken Russias immediate interests and capabilities, it actually drove a wedge between Berlin and Moscow. Till the Ukraine crisis, German-Russian relations were on a high trajectory which Mr. Putin wanted to convert into a strategic alliance. A German-Russian-Eurasian alliance could potentially have threatened the foundations of the unipolar world. Mr. Trump would like to do to the China-Russia partnership exactly what Mr. Obama did to the Russian-German partnership.

### Three hurdles

But there are three key problems: political, geopolitical and strategic. One, Mr. Obama has created enough hurdles for Mr. Trump in dealing with the Russians. Mr. Trump already suffers from a credibility problem after all the allegations of his campaigns links with Russia. True, he could lift the sanctions through executive orders, but that will further alienate the powerful Russophobic elements in the Washington establishment from his administration.

Two, Russian foreign policy is historically shaped by its deep insecurity. Its long border with European and Caucasian sides has no physical protection and is exposed to potential aggressions. NATO keeps expanding to these areas, which explains Russias adventures in Georgia and Ukraine. Mr. Trump cannot win a sustainable deal with Moscow unless he assures the Russians over NATO. This means, Mr. Trump will have to either give up on or rein in NATO. Both will have consequences from Europe.

Third, todays Russia is not the Russia of 2009 when Mr. Obama became the President and promised a reset. Russia then was largely confined to its backyard – Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. But now Russia has already spread its influence to other regions. Its the dominant player in Syria, a strong ally of Iran (one of the countries targeted by Mr. Trumps Muslim ban order), and a shadow force in Afghanistan where the Americans are fighting an unwinnable war for over 15 years. Moscows bargaining capacity is much higher now. It will demand greater compromises from the U.S. for a potential détente. And how is Mr. Trump, who has promised to put America first – a euphemism to restore the U.S.s slipped glory as the worlds pre-eminent superpower – going to address this? Both sides may be testing the waters for now, but ideological intentions, as history shows, are unlikely to trump geopolitical realities. The fault lines will start emerging as soon as they get down to business.

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