
TRUMP'S RUSSIA POLICY IS SCARING ALLIES AND CONFUSING EVEN THE KREMLIN

- 24.03.2017

Vox (23 March 2017)

No issue has given Donald Trump more grief than Russia. The Trump teams controversial ties to the Kremlin forced the departure of National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, got Attorney General Jeff Sessions into hot water, and kicked off an FBI investigation into Trumps campaign.

So youd think Trump would have something to show for all of this: some set of bold new policy initiatives with Moscow that would justify the costly pro-Putin stance. Yet two months in, nothing like that has happened — and there are no signs of anything on the horizon.

The administrations rhetoric on Russia so far has been a strange muddle, with Defense Secretary James Mattis and other top administration officials stressing that the US remains committed to NATO and harshly criticizing Russian strongman Vladimir Putin even as Trump himself continues to attack the alliance and largely ignore Putins support for foreign dictators and crackdown on dissent at home.

In terms of substantive policy, meanwhile, Trump has maintained the Obama administrations relatively hard-line stance towards Moscow, including harsh economic sanctions. The Trump administration also took a quiet step to reassure jittery NATO allies by carrying through with a planned deployment of 900 American troops to Poland.

The problem is that its impossible to know if Trump will stay the course or adopt a more pro-Kremlin approach after he meets with Putin later this month. More broadly, allies and adversaries alike are wondering whether Washingtons true Russia policy is what Mattis is doing or what Trump is tweeting.

I dont think there is currently a Russia policy, Mark Galeotti, a senior research fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague, tells me. What that means is, in the void, we have in effect multiple Russia policies.

The practical upshot of this confusion is that few people outside of Trumps inner circle know how the US plans to approach Russia — not in Moscow, not in other European capitals, and not even on Capitol Hill or in the halls of the Pentagon and State Department.

This confusion has one positive upshot, according to Russia experts — slowing Kremlin adventurism while it figures out just what the famously unpredictable Trump will let the Russians get away with. But otherwise, it produces a kind of worst-of-all-worlds outcome, where the NATO alliance is weakened while the US and Russia remain at loggerheads on major policy issues ranging from Moscows support for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad to Ukraine. Its a situation that

persists only because of a lack of clear direction from the president himself.

Before taking office, Trump repeatedly promised to rebuild US relations with Russia.

Having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only stupid people, or fools, would think that it is bad, Trump tweeted in January. 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!

This rhetoric □ Trumpy flourishes aside □ sounds somewhat similar to the Obama administrations famously flawed attempt to do the same thing.

US-Russia relations had soured in the late Bush administration due to Russias 2008 invasion of Georgia; when Obama took office in 2009, he promised to reset US-Russia relations. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even pushed a physical reset button during a March 2009 meeting (in an ominous harbinger of troubles to come, the wrong Russian word was printed on the button).

The Obama reset led to nearly immediate policy shifts. By April 2009, the Obama administration and the Russians had begun drafting a nuclear arms limitation treaty, New START, which was signed a year later. The deal, which remains in force today, caps each countrys number of deployed nuclear warheads at 1,550.

The US also won Russian backing for the military campaign that ousted Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 and for maintaining the debilitating sanctions that brought Tehran to the negotiating table and paved the way for Obamas landmark nuclear deal with Iran.

The Trump reset, by contrast, doesnt seem to have really started. There have only been two public instances of high-level contact between the Trump team and its Russian counterparts: a Trump phone call with Putin and a meeting between Lavrov and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Neither appears to have kicked off new negotiations on core issues, though Tillerson will travel to Moscow in April to meet with Putin.

And when it comes to policy, there have been no meaningful shifts from the prior administration:

Sanctions on Russia resulting from its invasion of Ukraine remain in place, as do sanctions put in place by the Obama administration after Russias hack of the US election.

There have been no direct negotiations over US-Russia military cooperation in Syria, nor any evidence that the US has formally abandoned its position that Assad must renounce power as part of any permanent peace deal there.

There has been very little interaction between the administration and Russia, Ivo Daalder, former US ambassador to NATO and current president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, tells me. There is no deviation from the line that existed prior to January 20.

The little actual movement weve seen has been surprisingly confrontational. During his call with Putin, Trump suggested that he was skeptical about renewing the New START treaty (though he reportedly had to pause the call to ask an aide what New START was).

And while Trump is still not sending lethal weapons to Ukraine — a policy idea that Trumps team had removed from the GOPs 2016 platform — he is also deploying 900 troops to a NATO force in Poland, a show of force explicitly designed to challenge Russia.

The purpose is to deter aggression in the Baltics and in Poland, Lt. Col. Steven Gventer, the commander of the deployment, said at a press conference on March 20. We are fully ready to be lethal.

There is, in short, little concerted effort from the Trump administration to implement the pro-Russia policy it promised. The Kremlin-friendly rhetoric thats been so painful for Trump politically has yielded little in the way of concrete gains, either for US-Russia relations or for Trump personally.

Theres a key reason Trumps actual Russia policy has been so out of whack with his campaign rhetoric: Most of his staff disagrees with it.

Mattis is a Russia hawk, who took a hard line on Russia in his confirmation hearings. So did Tillerson, who said he would maintain Russia sanctions despite his long history of doing business in that country while employed by Exxon Mobil.

Vice President Mike Pence famously undercut Trumps line on Russia in the vice presidential debate, and traveled to Europe while in office to reassure NATO allies of Americas commitment to the alliance. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley gave a fiery speech at the UN Security Council condemning Russias annexation of Crimea, vowing that our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine."

Without Trump setting an explicit and detailed policy agenda, these deputies are left to determine what the USs Russia policy should be and use their own powers to make that a reality. Given the presidents demonstrated disinterest in policy detail, thats what appears to be happening.

This is a kind of bizarre policy discussion thats being had, in some ways, in speeches to third parties, in op-eds, and suchlike — because a conversation is not being had in the Oval Office, Galeotti says.

From the point of view of Americas allies, this chaos is better than Trump outright rejecting NATO and embracing the Kremlins agenda. But its hardly reassuring.

Americas European allies depend, above all else, on the United States being predictable. No one can force the US to act on Article 5, the provision of the NATO treaty that says an attack on one ally will be treated as an attack on all. This has worked, historically, because allies have believed the United States is firmly committed to keeping the peace in Europe. Trumps statements on the campaign trail and since taking office — calling NATO obsolete, praising Putin, suggesting he wouldnt defend allies unless they spent more on defense — call all of that into question.

In order to calm nervous allies, Trump needs to do more than maintain Obama policies. He needs to go out of his way to explain to allies that his past statements are old news and that he, personally, is committed to the alliance. The haphazard results of individual actions by deputies arent enough.

A lot of what NATO runs on [is] the rhetoric, the commitment, and the trust, Jenny Mathers, a

Russia scholar at Aberystwyth University, says. Trump has done a lot to break that trust – even though he hasn't held troops back, even though he hasn't done the concrete policy decisions [that would weaken NATO].

The administration's chaotic policymaking, at times, makes things worse rather than better. A good example is Secretary Tillerson planning to skip the biannual NATO meeting of foreign ministers. This meeting, called the ministerial, is absolutely vital – it sets the agenda for NATO for the rest of the year, which can't really be done without the participation of NATO's most powerful member-state. Skipping the meeting was a powerful signal that the Trump administration wasn't interested in NATO, especially after Trump's deeply uncomfortable meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

After crapping on Merkel during her visit and after, this is more destruction of allied relationships, Steve Saideman, an expert on NATO at Carleton University, tells me. This is awful not just for optics but for actual relations with our allies.

This damage does not appear to have been done intentionally. The reason for the cancellation was that Tillerson wanted to meet with the Chinese president, who was in Washington at the same time as the meeting. NATO and the State Department are now racing to reschedule it so Tillerson can attend, though it's not clear those efforts will pay off.

Normally, Russia would be rubbing its hands with glee at anything sowing dissension in the NATO ranks. But the public rhetoric from the Kremlin since inauguration, at least where Trump is concerned, has been fairly sour.

The Russian media, up until recently, put a lot of effort into praising Trump, Mathers says. Lately, they seem to have pulled the plug on that propaganda. The media coverage of Trump has changed pretty radically in the past several weeks.

Reportedly, Russian state media is being echoed in the halls of the Kremlin.

I was talking to people in the Russian foreign ministry who were really actually quite concerned at the time [of Trump's election], and I think that's continued, Galeotti says.

The reason, according to Galeotti and Mathers, is that Russia depends on the United States being predictable. When Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine, it could pretty much guess what America's response would be: sanctions, but certainly no kind of direct military retaliation. The Russians knew that the Americans fully understood the risks of military escalation, and so wouldn't do anything too risky.

Trump, by contrast, has elevated unpredictability to the level of strategic doctrine.

"We must as a nation be more unpredictable, he said in an April 2016 foreign policy speech. We are totally predictable. We tell everything. Were sending troops? We tell them. Were sending something else? We have a news conference. We have to be unpredictable, and we have to be unpredictable starting now."

Combine this theory with his limited policy knowledge and pattern of erratic behavior, and the Russians really can't count on him to act predictably, which means all their moves have suddenly gotten a whole lot riskier. As a result, you've seen little in the way of super-aggressive moves by the Kremlin – just some relatively low-risk probing, like sending a ship off the American coast,

designed to test just how the Trump administration sees them.

In the short term, then, Trumps theory of foreign policy is kind of working: Unpredictability is deterring Russia from trying anything too dangerous. In the longer run, though, its plausible that Russia might push Trumps limits too far □ or that in a crisis situation in a place like Syria, both sides act in a destabilizing fashion.

Its more likely that there will be more dramatic [provocations], and that maybe is more likely to get out of control, Mathers says. I think were going to find out if you have a more stable situation when you have clear limits or when you have uncertain boundaries.

So the Russians, if forced to choose between Americas historically predictable hostility and Trumps new unpredictability, might well now choose the former □ a kind of ironic button on the Russian intervention in the US election to help Trump.

We tend to think that if were worried, the Russians must be happy, Galeotti says. This is one of those ironic situations where actually everybodys worried.

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