



Trump's Russia Policy May Provide First Conflict with GOP Hawks

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If President-elect Donald Trump makes good on his campaign promise to seek some sort of rapprochement with Russia, Republican interventionists and hawks in Congress could find themselves in new and uncomfortable territory .

There is considerable overlap between Trump and establishment security Republicans on issues like blocking the domestic resettlement of Syrian Middle Eastern refugees and reneging on last year's nuclear deal with Iran. But it is whether and how to respond to the spate of recent Russian provocations, including a series of election-related cyber attacks, which is perhaps the biggest point of intra-party tension in the foreign policy realm.

On the other hand, given how ideologically contradictory many of Trump's statements have been, experts told CQ it is a big question whether he will actually pursue some of the goals he laid out during his campaign, such as seeking a partnership with Russia in Syria to go after Islamic State terrorists while leaving Bashar al-Assad alone.

"My sense is that Trump is more likely to be a delegator on these things," said David Edelstein, an associate professor of international relations theory at Georgetown University. "I just can't see him getting into the policy on these things. It's a big unknown."

Edelstein said Trump's secretary of State pick would have an outsize importance given his own lack of policy acumen in the area. Among those rumored to be in the running for the position are campaign surrogate and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Foreign Relations

Chairman Bob Corker. Both men have traditionalist foreign policy views, though Corker has welcomed some of Trump's aggressive urgings for NATO member nations to increase their defense spending.

Emma Ashford, an international security research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Trump will almost certainly rely on Republicans in his administration who don't share his odd mix of foreign policy views, given how solidly pro-intervention and pro-engagement the professional Republican defense community is. Having to rely on traditionalist thinkers may constrain his ability to take actions that drastically reshape U.S. foreign policy, including toward Russia, she said.

"There is no repository of people that he can use to staff his administration, even at the highest level, who share his views," Ashford said. "It's such an odd combination of isolationist combined with some imperialist ideas."

Boost to Spending

One area where there is common agreement between Trump and Republican lawmakers is in their calls to significantly boost military spending. That broad agreement could break down, though, when it comes to whether to continue and even expand President Barack Obama's fiscal 2017 budget request to quadruple military spending in Central and Eastern Europe to more than \$3.4 billion to deter further Russian aggression. Putin has made clear he detests the U.S. military buildup near Russia's borders.

Trump has also criticized the state of the nuclear arsenal, saying the United States has fallen behind in modernization compared to Russia, a point experts do not agree with. Were Trump to back the Pentagon's plans for a comprehensive update of the U.S. nuclear triad, which includes building new generations of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and long-range heavy bombers, Putin would take offense and any hopes of a rapprochement could be out the window, Edelstein said.

Still, if Trump makes up his mind to vigorously pursue a strategic reset in relations with Russia, there's not much Republican lawmakers can do about it.

"Congress' ability to constrain the foreign policy behavior of the president is relatively limited on these things," Edelstein said. "If Trump wants to pursue some sort of rapprochement with Russia, it's not clear what even the angriest congressional Republicans can do to stop that. They control the power of the purse but when it comes to diplomacy there's not really that much they can do about that."

Eugene Gholz, a former Pentagon senior adviser for defense manufacturing in the George W. Bush administration, said he thinks some Republican hawks could be convinced to go along with a potential Trump-Putin plan to combat extremist terrorist groups in Syria "even if that plan involves attacking so-called moderate [Syrian] rebels."

GOP lawmakers to watch for points of tension

For some Republican neoconservatives like Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain, R-Ariz., and Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., the advent of a Republican president who openly

admires Putin and opposes providing lethal weapons to Ukraine is expected to be a shock to the system.

Still, Paul Saunders, a Russia specialist and the executive director of the Center for the National Interest, which advocates foreign policy realism, said he thinks there are a number of GOP lawmakers in both chambers who haven't been satisfied with the Republican defense establishment but refrained from speaking out "because there was what appeared to be a very public consensus on a lot of those issues and it could be perceived as damaging to the party."

Saunders said lawmakers like Sen. Rand Paul, who won re-election Tuesday, may tacitly go along with Trump if he advocates a restrained policy in Eurasia though he said he wouldn't call the Kentucky Republican a potential ally of Trump's given the other areas of policy divergence between the two men.

"It's clear also that there will be some deep divisions because many of the people in the national security establishment on Capitol Hill, the people who are the most vocal on these issues, they have clear perspectives," Saunders said. "It does mean that some Republicans in the Congress are going to have to be careful what they say and they may have to think twice before openly opposing a president from their own party."

Among those named as most likely to speak out against any drastic changes to U.S. policy toward Russia was McCain, who coasted to re-election on Tuesday.

"I think many people are looking to McCain to be the sort of grown-up Republican to give some sanity to all of this," Edelstein said. "I think he is a good person to look toward for that."

Ashford said she was particularly interested to see what positions Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., takes going forward. The freshman senator quickly made a name for himself in the 114th Congress with his arch-neoconservative positions toward Iran, Russia and the arming of Ukraine. However, the Senate Armed Services member has also been a stalwart defender of Trump.

"He always said 'I think if you get into office, we can educate him,'" Ashford said of Cotton's support of Trump. She said that is probably how many Republicans will at least initially view the new president: opting to swarm him with expert advice in hopes of swaying him to their worldview.