



Donald Trump facing test in meet with Vladimir Putin

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Tomorrow's high-stakes face-to-face meeting between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Germany will test Trump's political negotiation skills against a former KGB spy known for his mastery of statecraft.

While no major policy agreements are expected to come out of the meeting, experts and U.S. lawmakers said Trump's main objective in his first negotiations with the Russian leader is to project strength and avoid conceding too much.

"There are concerns that Trump is not an experienced (foreign policy) negotiator, and Vladimir Putin very much is," said Emma Ashford, a Research Fellow at the Cato Institute. "We could end up seeing something unexpected come out of this, and that would be the worst-case scenario."

White House officials said Trump plans to focus on Russia's actions in Ukraine and the war in Syria, while Russian officials said in a statement that Putin's agenda includes pressing the Trump administration to ease U.S. sanctions against Russia, including a demand for the return of two Russian compounds seized in response to Russia's efforts to meddle in the U.S. election.

Relations between the U.S. and Russia are at an all-time low, according to officials of both nations, despite Trump's campaign pledges to build closer ties with Moscow. Trump also faces pressure from home to take a tough stance against Putin. While the White House has reportedly mulled returning the compounds, lawmakers pushing a bipartisan bill that would toughen sanctions against Russia — and restrict Trump's ability to lift them — will rebuff efforts to ease penalties.

North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile test this week adds another layer to the already complex foreign relations backdrop for the bilateral meeting — but it could serve as a good opening point, since both leaders share an interest in putting a halt to Kim Jong Un's nuclear program.

"North Korea is probably a topic that they can talk about without any controversy," Ashford said. But it is unlikely Trump will back a diplomatic plan pushed by Russia and China that would call for the U.S. to curb its joint military exercises with South Korea and halt deployment of a missile shield in exchange for North Korea halting its nuclear program.

It's unclear what, if anything, Trump will say to Putin about Russian election meddling. But silence on the issue will result in blowback on the home front.

“We will not accept it in any way if he just sweeps it under the rug,” said U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), a ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee that is probing Russian election interference.

The meeting between Trump and Putin was initially planned as a pull-aside on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hamburg, but later planned as a more formal bilateral confab.