

# THEWEEK

## Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin: Battle of the egos

July 7, 2017

Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin meet in Hamburg today for a one-on-one battle of wills and words that will set the tone for the next four years of relations between the two countries.

According to the New York Times, top aides are not entirely sure what the US President will focus on.

Trump often doesn't read the briefing books and relies on in-person information, the officials said, "so aides also have written a list of tweet-length sentences that summarise the main points Trump could bring up with Putin".

HR McMaster, Trump's national security adviser, said: "It's really going to be whatever the President wants to talk about."

While a formal agenda may not have been drawn up, the talks come at a time of sweeping geopolitical change - from a seven-year war in Syria to a month-old showdown between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

With the US and North Korea on a war footing, and Russia and China acting as de facto mediators, there are many pressing topics that could push their way to the top of today's agenda.

Two White House officials told CNN the main issues will be Syria and the situation in Ukraine. Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, prompting sanctions on Moscow from a number of countries, including the US, Canada and members of the EU.

McMaster also said officials were instructed to draw up options to confront Russia over "destabilising behaviour" such as cyber threats and political subversion.

### **The cult of personality**

Beyond the issues, the personal relationship between the two alpha males has been the source of much speculation, not least by Trump.

"If Putin likes Donald Trump, I consider that an asset, not a liability," the then president-elect said at a press conference in January.

But that was six months ago, before Trump found himself under an investigative cloud involving alleged Republican ties to the Kremlin and questions surrounding Russia's potential meddling in the 2016 US elections.

Trump has morphed from Putin admirer to Putin basher in the last six months. He lashed out at Russia while meeting Polish President Andrzej Duda this week, blaming Moscow for "destabilising" behaviour in eastern Europe following its intervention in Ukraine.

In return, Putin slammed US sanctions and trade protectionism just a day before the leaders' highly anticipated meeting.

Some US media outlets, experts and lawmakers believe Trump's main objective during today's meeting will be to project strength and avoid conceding too much.

"This first meeting is extremely important," Michael McFaul, who served as ambassador to Russia in from 2012 to 2014, wrote in The Washington Post.

"It is up to you to set a tough but pragmatic tone for your interactions with the Russian President for the next four years."

### **What Vladimir Putin wants**

From the Kremlin's perspective, there has also been a feeling of apprehension ahead of today's one-on-one. Analyst Fyodor Lukyanov said the meeting would "give Putin a chance to take the measure of his US counterpart", reports The Guardian. "He can get a personal impression and try to understand whether something will change in the future."

Trump has "perplexed" the Kremlin because it's not clear what his priorities are, nor whether he can work with Congress to achieve them, added Lukyanov.

It is thought the Russian leader will push for the US to relax some of the sanctions, something Trump is known to have supported in the past, says Philip Stephens in the Financial Times.

"Left to his own devices, Trump would lift the US sanctions imposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in return for Putin's collaboration in Syria and Kremlin acquiescence in US efforts to contain Iran," he writes.

With Congress and most of his administration set against concessions to Russia, Trump "has been hemmed in so far in his overtures to Moscow" says The Guardian.

A bill passed in the Senate last month, with a 98-2 vote, that would strengthen sanctions on Russia and require congressional approval for any administration attempt to roll them back.

Despite this, Trump has reportedly told White House aides to come up with possible concessions to offer as bargaining chips to Putin in the meeting.

### **Trump, the wild card**

But there is also potential for President Trump to remake policy on the spot in the meeting room, a concept that worries US officials.

"The big wild card in all this is the person holding the position of President of the United States," said Tom Malinowski, one of the state officials who lobbied for the codification of the sanctions

on Russia. "We don't know what he will say when he meets the master-manipulator from the Kremlin."

Michael McFaul, a former US ambassador to Russia, says neither side "want to come out of there saying, 'We're friends, and the enemy is the deep state and the media'".

McFaul foresees little major change in the relations between Washington and Moscow at the end of the meeting.

"Politics does constrain, I think, the parameters of the possible for any kind of major breakthrough," he writes.

Fiona Hill, the National Security Council's senior director for Europe and Russia, agrees, saying that while Trump has repeatedly hailed the "strong" and "brilliant" Russian leader, she expected no change in longstanding US-Russia tensions.

"I think it will come down to what it's always been," she told [The Atlantic](#), "where the Russians will get all giddy with expectations, and then they'll be dashed, like, five minutes into the relationship, because the US and Russia just have a very hard time... being on the same page."

The best result for the US may be for the meeting to end with the status quo.

"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."