



When Trump Met Putin: Is Reconciliation in the Air?

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The long-awaited meeting between America's and Russia's presidents finally occurred at the Group of 20 summit. They got along great, said U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, connecting "very quickly," and talked for more than two hours. Even first lady Melania Trump couldn't drag her husband away after the first hour.

It sounds like another international bromance in the making.

The conversation began with Russia's apparent election hack. Putin denied it. The two presidents agreed to stay out of each other's political affairs.

That's a fair starting point, though it brings to mind U.S. President Ronald Reagan's favorite (supposedly Russian) saying: "trust but verify." The integrity of America's electoral system is a vital interest and should be carefully protected. At the same time, U.S. officials would do well to remember their anger at Moscow's intrusion and forswear mucking around in other people's votes, as Washington has done to a reported 81 nations, including Russia a couple decades ago.

The two presidents also talked about Syria. But, it appears, they paid much less attention to it than the election, though they okayed a "de-escalation agreement" and ceasefire for southwest Syria.

Disagreement over the civil war should be easy to resolve. Once the Islamic State group is defeated, Washington should wave goodbye.

All along Moscow has had one fairly simple objective: save the Assad regime. That's a morally dubious enterprise, but over the years America has backed its share of brutal thugs. Even now Trump has been acting like the chief American lobbyist for the embarrassing Saudi royals. However, at least Moscow has a chance of achieving its end.

In contrast, the U.S. wants to overthrow Assad, defeat IS, empower the half dozen "moderates" still to be found among the insurgents, work with the Kurdish militias, avoid offending the Turks, get the squabbling Sunni gulf states to do more, create a liberal political order like those established in Afghanistan and Iraq, or not, and avoid getting into a war with Russia.

The best approach is to simply leave and allow the Russians and regional powers to cope with the mess. It won't pretty. But the aftermath also isn't America's responsibility. After making a hash of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, Washington should take a break from nation-building.

However, the biggest issue, which received limited attention, is Ukraine. This is the most important barrier to improving bilateral relations, as well as reducing European tensions.

Russia has behaved badly toward Ukraine (and Georgia). But for both the U.S. and Europe the issues raised are primarily humanitarian rather than security. Ukraine has never mattered to the defense of America or Europe. Nothing justifies a military confrontation, especially with a nuclear-armed power which views border security as a vital interest.

Sanctions aren't achieving anything useful. They offer continuing punishment of the Russian nation, but little incentive for the Russian government to change its behavior.

There is no chance, short of a general war, that Moscow will disgorge Crimea. Russia might be willing to abandon local separatists and exit Donbas, though Kiev, too, would have to fulfill its bargain.

However, Moscow has a continuing incentive to keep "destabilizing" Ukraine, which Trump criticized in his speech in Poland, so long as Kiev is pressing to join NATO. A long-term solution is unlikely absent an allied pledge not to bring Ukraine into the transatlantic alliance.

Ukrainians understandably might desire to be defended by the globe's superpower. But the decision whether to confront a nuclear-armed power on its border over issues it views as vital is only for the allies, most importantly the U.S., which would do all the heavy-lifting in any war with Russia, to make. NATO should explicitly state that irrespective of previous pledges foolishly made, neither Ukraine nor Georgia will be inducted.

Of course, any agreement would be criticized, given the bizarre blood-lust evident in Washington. But if Trump claims to be a leader, he should set as a priority normalizing relations between Moscow and Washington.

On many issues the president appears to have fallen afoul of conventional wisdom in the nation's capital. But so far not on Russia.

Russia matters. Washington needs to restore a working relationship with Moscow on multiple issues. That doesn't mean trusting Putin. It does mean making policy in accord with the way the world is, not the way we wish it was. Most important, America and Europe need to reach an accommodation with Russia that offers basic stability and security for both sides.

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