

Putin's 'Win-Win' With Trump

The treaty expires in February and Putin hopes that a one-year renewal at this juncture can only be a “win-win” for Russia regardless of who wins the US presidential election.

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The Russian proposal of October 20 for a simple one-year extension beyond February when the New START treaty expires, has received a curt reply from Washington within hours.

Something is still better than nothing, as the curtain comes down on Russian-American relations at the end of the US President Donald Trump's first term. This was not how Trump's triumphant victory in 2016 was supposed to turn out. The mood in Moscow was euphoric at that time.

The Russian elites were absolutely, openly thrilled about Trump's victory. In a message to Trump, President Vladimir Putin congratulated him and while acknowledging that there was currently a crisis in US-Russian relations, expressed the hope that the crisis would now come to an end. Nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovksy poured champagne. The patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church called on God to help Trump govern.

The Russian people hoped for an easing of the sanctions. The pundits speculated that Trump would halt NATO expansion and the alliance's deployment of missile defence systems, and would join Russia for a joint fight against the ISIS in Syria.

Looking back, however, the Trump years are ending with Putin looking distinctly aged. The roller coaster ride took a heavy toll on the youthful Black Belt. Never in the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries — not even during the darkest hours of the cold war — an American administration dared to seize Russian diplomatic properties in the US or kidnap Russian citizens and lock them up for 20-year prison terms.

Over the so-called Salisbury poisoning, the Trump administration led the largest ever western collective expulsion of Russian diplomats in history — the US alone expelled 60 diplomats while UK, the aggrieved party, expelled only 23 Russians and all other allies put together expelled another 40.

In Syria, a testy “hybrid war” between the two militaries ensued, even as more sanctions were imposed against Russia, including for deterring Russian arms sales abroad and disrupting the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project with Germany.

Ted Carpenter, Russia expert at the Cato Institute, noted this week that the US-Russian relationship is “increasingly toxic” and the situation “creates very serious dangers. Relations have become so tense that both sides apparently are on hair-trigger, “launch on warning” status for their strategic nuclear forces.”

Washington encourages NATO to poach into “post-Soviet space” looking for new partners and to broaden the scope, and speed up the pace of NATO military exercises in Russia's “near

abroad”. Intriguingly, an arc of instability has appeared on Russia’s periphery — Belarus, Caucasus, Kyrgyzstan. The US took hostile measures in arms control — withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, exit from the Open Skies Treaty, indifference toward the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (NEW START).

Trump kept proclaiming every now and then, rightly so, that no president in American history had ever been so harsh toward Russia as him. He was under pressure to display his loyalty to America. On the other hand, he also kept the tough Kremlin leader captive with his seductive hints of constructive engagement some day.

As regards the NEW START, there was even a rare “bipartisan consensus” in the US which favoured extension. The treaty expires in February. Its provisions call for a five-year extension, which Putin was willing to embrace. Joseph Biden, the Democratic candidate for president, has said the same.

But Trump balked, saying the treaty is deeply flawed, and he refused a straight renewal. He parried, insisting he wanted China to join the agreement, knowing Beijing won’t agree. Importantly, Washington also demanded that Moscow had to additionally freeze those weapons in its stockpile that might not be deployed.

In an interview with the Moscow daily Kommersant on September 21, the White House’s special presidential envoy for arms control Marshall Billingslea rudely threatened that in a second term, Trump would be even tougher — “I suspect that ... if Russia has not taken up our offer, that the price of admission, as we would say in the US, goes up.” The foreign ministry in Moscow reacted furiously to Billingslea’s threat.

But Putin, on calm reflection, in something of a concession, gave instructions on October 16 at a Kremlin meeting to propose to Washington that both countries make a “political obligation” to freeze their “existing arsenals of nuclear warheads,” but only for one year.

The Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has since remarked inter alia at a press conference on October 20 that New START treaty “by itself is not a good deal” for the US and its allies. “Only 45 percent of Russia’s nuclear arsenal is subject to numerical limits. Meanwhile, that agreement restricts 92 percent of America’s arsenal that is subject to the limits contained in the New START agreement,” he complained.

Pompeo added, “And China – China of course is not bound at all. Zero percent of their weapon systems are governed and restricted by the New START agreement. What we’ve proposed to extend that agreement would be historic, it’d be a great achievement. Russia has agreed in principle to freeze all of its nuclear warheads. We’re very pleased about that. But we need to make sure that US and Russian negotiators get together just as soon as possible to continue to make progress to finalise a verifiable agreement.”

The catch word is “verifiable agreement”. Moscow’s leeway is limited on a “verifiable agreement”. Russia cannot possibly allow US intrusive verification involving permanent onsite missions. Disclosure of their numbers and the deployments of non-strategic nuclear weapons may also pose problems.

Nonetheless, some compromise formula may still be found, since Putin genuinely believes he is negotiating from a position of strength. As he sees it, Russia possesses classes of nuclear

weapons no one else has — “faster, more powerful and precise,” and Russia is no longer “catching up” with the US.

The state of play is as follows: Trump wants a reelection foreign-policy coup (preferably, with a photo-op), although his negotiating team is in no such rush and would rather press the Russians to come round to Washington’s terms. At the same time, after all, this will be a legally non-binding step, which allows Trump a free hand to push ahead with the grandiose plans for the US to attain nuclear superiority over Russia.

Nudging Russia to turn against China on a strategically important issue also serves a geopolitical purpose. Moscow understands the motivations of the American side, but Putin is eager to be helpful, since a second Trump term will any day be the lesser of two evils compared to a Joseph Biden presidency.

Besides, there is always that tantalising possibility that Trump 2.0, freed of compulsions of domestic politics and the election cycle, may turn out to be different from what he has been in the first term to push ahead an improvement of relations with Russia, if he so wishes.

The bottom line is that Putin’s offer to have a one-year extension of NEW START is smart thinking. It is assured of a positive resonance on the world stage. And its optics can be seen as Trump-friendly, but not anti-Biden, either.

For, if it is indeed going to be a Biden presidency after all, the probability is high that the NEW START will not be allowed to lapse. Unlike Trump, Biden has his heart in disarmament.

And it is in Moscow’s interest to “lock in” Biden onto a path of serious US-Russia engagement, which would inevitably define the trajectory of his overall policies toward Russia. Suffice to say, it holds the potential to moderate Biden’s attitudes toward Moscow.

The point is, Putin feels distressed that Russia’s relations with Europe and the US are in tatters. Russia’s alliance with China has its unique characteristics but a balance between the Eurasian and Western vectors of Russian diplomacy is to its optimal advantage in the present international environment.

Putin hopes that a one-year renewal of NEW START at this juncture can only be a “win-win” for Russia regardless of who wins in the US presidential election on 3rd November.