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Putin-Phobia, the Only Bipartisan Game in Town

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Few issues generate a bipartisan response in Washington. President Donald Trump's upcoming summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin is one.

Democrats who once pressed for détente with the Soviet Union act as if Trump will be giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Neoconservatives and other Republican hawks are equally horrified, having pressed for something close to war with Moscow since the latter's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Both sides act as if the Soviet Union has been reborn and Cold War has restarted.

Russia's critics present a long bill of requirements to be met before they would relax sanctions or otherwise improve relations. Putin could save time by agreeing to be an American vassal.

Topping everyone's list is Russian interference in the 2016 election, which was outrageous. Protecting the integrity of our democratic system is a vital interest, even if the American people sometimes treat candidates with contempt. Before joining the administration National Security Adviser John Bolton even called Russian meddling "a *casus belli*, a true act of war."

Yet Washington has promiscuously meddled in other nations' elections. Carnegie Mellon's Dov H. Levin figured that between 1946 and 2000 the U.S. government interfered with 81 foreign contests, including the 1996 Russian poll. Retired U.S. intelligence officers freely admit that Washington has routinely sought to influence other nations' elections.

Yes, of course, Americans are the good guys and favor politicians and parties that the other peoples would vote for if only they better understood their own interests—as we naturally do. Unfortunately, foreign governments don't see Uncle Sam as a Vestal Virgin acting on behalf of mankind. Indeed, Washington typically promotes outcomes more advantageous to, well, Washington. Perhaps Trump and Putin could make a bilateral commitment to stay out of other nations' elections.

Another reason to shun Russia, argued Senator Rob Portman, is because "Russia still occupies Crimea and continues to fuel a violent conflict in eastern Ukraine." Moscow annexed Crimea after a U.S.-backed street putsch ousted the elected but highly corrupt Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. The territory historically was Russian, turned over to Ukraine most likely as part of

a political bargain in the power struggle following Joseph Stalin's death. A majority of Crimeans probably wanted to return to Russia. However, the annexation was lawless.

Rather like America's dismemberment of Serbia, detaching Kosovo after mighty NATO entered the final civil war growing out of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Naturally, the U.S. again had right on its side—it always does!—which obviously negated any obligations created by international law. Ever-virtuous Washington even ignored the post-victory ethnic cleansing by Albanian Kosovars

Still, this makes Washington's complaints about Russia seem just a bit hypocritical: do as we say, not as we do. In August 2008 John McCain expressed outrage over Russia's war with Georgia, exclaiming: "In the 21st century, nations don't invade other nations." Apparently he forgot that five years before the U.S. invaded Iraq, with McCain's passionate support. Here, too, the two presidents could agree to mutual forbearance.

Worse is the conflict in the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, between the Ukrainian army and separatists backed by Russia. Casualty estimates vary widely, but are in the thousands. Moscow successfully weakened Kiev and prevented its accession to NATO. However, that offers neither legal nor moral justification for underwriting armed revolt.

Alas, the U.S. again comes to Russia with unclean hands. Washington is supporting the brutal war by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates against Yemen. Area specialists agree that the conflict started as just another violent episode in a country which has suffered civil strife and war for decades. The Houthis, a tribal/ethnic/religious militia, joined with their long-time enemy, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, to oust his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi attacked to reinstall a pliable regime and win economic control. The U.S. joined *the aggressors*. At least Russia could claim national security was at stake, since it feared Ukraine might join NATO.

The "coalition" attack turned the Yemeni conflict into a sectarian fight, forced the Houthis to seek Iranian aid, and allowed Tehran to bleed its Gulf rivals at little cost. Human rights groups agree that the vast majority of civilian deaths and bulk of destruction have been caused by Saudi and Emirati bombing, with Washington's direct assistance. The humanitarian crisis includes a massive cholera epidemic. The security consequences include empowering al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Perhaps the U.S. and Russian governments could commit to jointly forgo supporting war for frivolous causes.

Human carnage and physical destruction are widespread in Syria. It will take years to rebuild homes and communities; the hundreds of thousands of dead can never be replaced. Yet Moscow has gone all out to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power. The Heritage Foundation's Luke Coffey and Alexis Mrachek demand that Moscow end its support for Assad "and demonstrate a genuine willingness to work with the international community to bring a political end to the Syrian civil war." The American Enterprise Institute's Leon Aron urged "a true Russian withdrawal from Syria, specifically ceding control of the Hmeymim airbase and dismantling recent expansions to the Tartus naval facility."

But the U.S. is in no position to complain. Washington's intervention has been disastrous, first discouraging a negotiated settlement, then promoting largely non-existent moderate insurgents, backing radicals, including the al-Qaeda affiliate (remember 9/11!?) against Assad, simultaneously allying with Kurds and Turks, and taking over the fight against the Islamic State even though virtually everyone in the Mideast had reason to oppose the group.

At least Russia, invited by the recognized government, had a reason to be there. Moscow's alliance with Syria dates back to the Cold War and poses no threat to America, which is allied with Israel, the Gulf States, Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. Washington also possesses military facilities in Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. For most Middle Eastern countries Moscow is primarily a bargaining chip to extort more benefits from America. Trump could propose that both countries withdraw from Syria.

Coffey and Mracek also express outrage that Moscow "has weaponized its natural gas exports to Europe, turning off the tap when countries dare go against its wishes." Russia's customers should not fear coercion via cut-off. Of course, the U.S. never uses its economic power for political ends. Other than to routinely impose economic sanctions on a variety of nations on its naughty list. And to penalize not only American firms, but businesses from *every other nation*.

Indeed, the Trump administration is insisting that every company in every country stop doing business with Iran. The U.S. government will bar violators from the U.S. market or impose ruinous fines on them. The Trump administration plans to sanction even its European allies, those most vulnerable to Russian energy politics. Which suggests a *modus vivendi* that America's friends likely would applaud: both Washington and Moscow could promise not to take advantage of other nations' economic vulnerabilities for political ends.

Cyberwar is a variant of economic conflict. Heritage's Mracek cited "the calamitous cyberattack, NotPetya," as "part of Russia's effort to destabilize Ukraine even further than in the past." Yes, a criminal act. Of course, much the same could be said of Stuxnet, which was thought to be a joint American-Israeli assault on Iran's nuclear program. And there are reports of U.S. attempts to similarly hamper North Korean missile development. Some consider such direct attacks on other governments to be akin to acts of war. Would Washington join Moscow in a pledge to become a good cyber citizen?

Virtually everyone challenges Russia on human rights. Moscow falls far short, with Putin's control of the media, manipulation of the electoral process, and violence against those perceived as regime enemies. In this regard, at least, America is far better.

But many U.S. allies similarly fail this test. For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has created an authoritarian state retaining merely the forms of democracy. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has constructed a tyranny more brutal than that of Hosni Mubarak. Saudi Arabia's monarchy allows neither religious nor political freedom, and has grown more repressive under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. It is not just Trump who remains largely silent about such assaults on people's basic liberties. So do many of the president's critics, who express horror that he would deal with such a man as Putin.

Moscow will not be an easy partner for the U.S. Explaining that “nobody wanted to listen to us” before he took over, in March Putin declared: “You hear us now!” Compromise is inevitable, but requires respect for both nations’ interests. A starting point could be returning the two nations’ embassies to full strength and addressing arms control, such as the faltering Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and soon-expiring Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. A larger understanding based on NATO ending alliance expansion in return for Russia withdrawing from the conflict in the Donbas would be worth pursuing.

Neither the U.S. nor the Russian Federation can afford to allow their relations to deteriorate into another Cold War. Russia is too important on too many issues, including acting as a counterweight to China, the most serious geopolitical challenge to the U.S. Hopefully the upcoming summit will begin the difficult process of rebuilding a working relationship between Washington and Moscow.

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