

As Trump Assembles a War Cabinet, the Kremlin Hopes for Better Relations

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The Kremlin has welcomed the election of Donald Trump in the hope that his administration will de-escalate tensions between Moscow and Washington and allow for a rapprochement on the basis of joint action in “the war on terror.” At the same time, there is widespread recognition in Russia of what is commonly described as the “unpredictable” character of the future Trump government, which has already brought onboard right-wing figures associated with the anti-Russian line pervasive in US ruling circles.

According to the Kremlin, in a telephone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump last week, both sides agreed on the “absolutely unsatisfactory state of bilateral relations,” the need to “normalize relations,” and the importance of “constructive cooperation.”

“There is a common political understanding” between the two, said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking Friday in Lima, Peru at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. “After Donald Trump officially takes the reins of power in his hands, the goal is to transform this spirit into the language of practical affairs,” he added.

Lavrov expressed disappointment at President Barak Obama’s call for Trump to continue Washington’s current policy towards Russia, saying relations between the two countries have “never been worse.”

In the immediate aftermath of Trump’s victory, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev declared his government’s respect for the “sovereign choice of the American people.” The same day, online news agency *Gazeta.ru* described the election as a blow to the “wave of anti-Kremlin material” put out by the mainstream US press, which had accused Russia of “destabilizing the situation in the US.” Social media outlets in Russia, the newspaper reported, were declaring, “On Wednesday (November 9), Russians woke up in a different country.”

According to the polling agency VTsIOM, 46 percent of the Russian population expects an improvement in relations with the US as a result of Trump’s victory. The semi-fascist Republican candidate was promoted in the Russian media as a figure friendly to the country, hostile to the interventionist policies of the current Obama and a future Clinton administration, and sympathetic to the right-wing social ideology embraced by the Kremlin.

The Russian government hopes that the coming to power of Trump will lead to a shift in US policy in Syria, potentially halting the proxy war aimed at overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow’s only Arab ally. The Islamist forces cultivated by the US as an instrument of imperialist policy are also active in Russia’s Caucasus and in Russia-allied

Central Asian states.

Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Committee on International Relations in Russia's upper parliamentary house, recently told the newspaper *Izvestia*: "The United States' strategic interests regarding Syria are about to change, because until now their priority was not in suppressing terrorism, but in displacing the country's government. Such changes are in line with Donald Trump's electoral rhetoric. He has said that the US would stop intervening in the internal affairs of foreign nations. If this really takes place, I see no problems whatsoever that could prevent Russia and the United States from being in the same coalition—one that would base its actions strictly on the norms of international law."

At the same time, the Kremlin believes it can benefit from the possible weakening of NATO, which Trump criticized during the election campaign. The expansion of the military alliance up to Russia's borders is understood as an existential threat by Moscow. Monday's announcement that the Kremlin would be stationing S-400 surface-to-air missiles and the nuclear-capable Iskander missile system in Kaliningrad, the Russian territory situated within the boundaries of Europe, is intended to signal Moscow's readiness to militarily oppose NATO.

The Kremlin sees new political possibilities in the dismay in European capitals over the US election result and the rifts emerging between Washington and Europe. The Russian ruling elite, notwithstanding its military saber-rattling, is a weak and venal social class, entirely dependent on the global economy for the preservation of its wealth. It attempts to secure its position by seeking an accommodation with the imperialist powers and navigating between their conflicting interests.

In addition, the Russian elite hopes that the incoming Trump administration, with its openly chauvinist and anti-democratic outlook, will cease exerting pressure on Moscow over human rights violations related to Russia's treatment of gays, immigrants, national minorities and other segments of the population. The Obama administration has used these issues in its campaign against Russia, in a cynical and hypocritical fashion, to portray its imperialist policy as driven by a desire to secure the well-being of oppressed peoples.

The conflict between Russia and the US is not simply the product of the whims of particular sections of the American ruling class, however. It is an expression of the desperate efforts of US capitalism to reestablish its global hegemony through conquest. This mad project objectively places it on a collision course with Russia, whose domination of much of the Eurasian land mass is viewed by the US as an intolerable limitation on its ability to control markets, resources and trade routes.

Any belief that the incoming Trump administration will provide a life-line for the Russian regime is delusional. The president-elect has already given or is considering giving top government appointments to figures known for their virulently anti-Russian positions.

Mitt Romney, with whom Trump met over the weekend to discuss taking on the post of secretary of state, attacked the Obama administration for being insufficiently tough with Russia. As the Republican presidential candidate in 2012, he described the country as "without question our number one geopolitical foe."

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, another contender for the job, recently observed, "Russia thinks it's a military competitor. It really isn't. It's our unwillingness under

Obama to even threaten the use of our military that makes Russia so powerful.”

Mike Pompeo, Trump’s choice for CIA director, is similarly considered an anti-Russia hawk. He has declared the idea that Russia wants to defeat ISIS in Syria to be a “fundamentally false narrative,” and insists that Moscow aims to reassert itself in the Middle East. Like Romney, he thinks President Obama has been too soft on Russia. His positions put him in line with much of the US military and intelligence community.

Powerful sections of the Republican Party, like the Democrats, are similarly hostile to Moscow. Senator John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, warned Trump last week against any effort to improve relations with Russia. “We should place as much faith in such statements as any other made by a former KGB agent who has plunged his country into tyranny, murdered his political opponents, invaded his neighbors, threatened America’s allies and attempted to undermine America’s elections,” he said.

Despite the positive response of the Kremlin to Trump’s election, political figures and media commentators in Russia, as well as the US, describe future relations between the two countries as unpredictable and conflict-ridden.

In his remarks on Trump’s victory, Prime Minister Medvedev sounded a cautious note when he observed that a great deal depended on the degree to which the president-elect “is able to preserve those priorities about which he spoke during the election campaign.”

General-Major Aleksandr Vladimirov, president of the Colleagues of War Experts of Russia, insisted that the most that could be hoped for was a return to nuclear arms control and “backing away from the edge of an armed conflict.”

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