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## [A sober view of the Putin-Trump “Bromance”](#)



International political commentary is full of exaggerated reactions to President Trump and President Putin’s recent meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg. Often “victory” is attributed to Putin. Assessments vary between claims that Putin and Trump [are back on their “bromance”](#) or that both [achieved what they desired](#). Others insist that Trump [gave Putin everything](#) he wanted. What most of these analyses have in common is that they are focused on highly speculative parameters of success, often calculable only in the “media image”. From analyzing only the tone, the duration of the meeting, the [“body language”](#) and how much each of the presidents smiled at each other, we miss what actually matters when trying to assess US-Russia relations.

No matter how Trump and Putin might like each other, or would like to like each other, we are deep enough into Trump’s presidency to note that aside from overinflated media debate on both ends, a debate that flatters Moscow, so far Trump’s presidency is much harder and challenging for Russia that Obama’s ever was.

In his first six months in the office, Trump has been trying to prove that he is not Obama by raising the stakes over “hot areas” of global politics where Obama, according to Trump himself, was “too weak”.

## **Trump's goals, hardly Moscow's**

In Syria, Trump has proved prepared to use military force, bombing Russia's only major ally in the region on multiple occasions. This more assertive approach not only risks physical collision between US and Russian forces, it leaves the US no choice but to get more involved in the conflict, something Obama stayed away from since 2011 and Putin capitalised on by "saving the day" with "utilization of Syrian chemical weapons". The announced cease-fire is not the first one of its kind. Clearly the previous attempts have failed. But if this latest one is successful, it would probably be the only achievement of US-Russia cooperation that Putin and Trump can deliver at the moment. Its success depends on a volatile situation on the ground, so even that is not a dependable success.

In North Korea, another flashpoint where Trump is trying to be more assertive than Obama, Moscow and Washington go separate ways. Trump has made it clear that North Korea would be among his top concerns in foreign policy agenda and clearly he is not willing to follow the footsteps of his predecessor. Obama's approach of carefully calculating diplomatic measures and his use of steady, incremental pressure is gone. Trump's [comments](#) which mull the use of military forces being used against North Korea is a nightmare both for Moscow and Beijing. Neither would prefer to see North Korea disarmed fully, let alone possible military action on the Korean peninsula. What if diplomacy fails and Kim Jong Un isn't swayed into submission, will Moscow join Trump in his quest for self-affirmation? Hardly.

Trump's overall attitude to China, if it ever goes beyond vague, critical comments, would never find a warm welcome in Putin's Russia, considering Moscow's need for friendly relations with Beijing would only grow in time in the absence of decent relations with Europe. So all the geopolitical scenarios where the US is befriending Russia to counter China (thus US should go easy on Moscow's regional aspirations) should stay as just that - scenarios, and usually ones mostly only considered by realpolitik thinkers who lost touch with this decade's political reality. So far, Trump seems to be thinking he can use Russia to aid his own goals, but when eventually he finds out that Russia is no partner for most of what he is driving for, his reasoning to "go easy on Russia" would soon evaporate. And that is a big problem for Moscow.

In this regard, US-Russia relations under Putin seem to repeat the same loop with every new US president. With Bush in 2001 - 2003, Obama in 2009 - 2012 and now possibly with Trump: a US aspiration to be partners with Russia, then a sense of dismay and confrontation - finally a new president gets elected who wants to start afresh. But compared to Bush and especially Obama, Trump is less predictable and definitely more squeamish.

## **Trump can't give what he can't give**

It seems Putin has already lost his chance to squeeze in as much "positive" as possible into Trump's presidency before this shift occurs naturally. In some sense, he never had this chance considering what role Russia has played in helping to secure Trump's presidency. The "toxicity of Russia" in the US under Trump is unmatched, unprecedented and unresolvable, making it impossible for Trump to give Russia anything that it actually wants now. And clearly, this is not the ceasefire in Syria.

Russia's biggest problem now, same as it was in 2014, the consequences of Putin's annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. Trump can't recognize the annexation, can't even give it the same treatment that was given to the Baltic States after the Soviet Union annexed it in the 1940s. He can't lift the sanctions; moreover it seems he can't even guarantee new sanctions won't be introduced.

Even after the G20 and the announcement of a prospective joint cyber security unit, Trump had to publicly correct himself only a day later, proving that his words are mostly words and the US establishment has the leverage to correct him quite promptly. His optimism about "cooperation" with Russia was thoroughly matched by Tillerson's remarks in Kyiv about the need to "restore Ukrainian territory or sanctions stay" that ultimately devalued the more optimistic tone of Trump and Putin in Hamburg.

## **Time to miss Obama**

The American political system, together with an uncompromising American media, destroys all chances for Putin to get anything from Trump when it comes to what Russia really needs (assuming that Putin will not "give up" Ukraine). That leaves a very small window of potential cooperation. Even if Syria can amount to be a

relative success, in the course of his presidency, sooner or later Trump will realize that he can't use Putin for much; the amount of divergent interests Putin's Russia and the United States have now is such that exceeds any potential gain from caving into Putin's requests.

Instead of a rather soft, cautious, diplomatic Obama that Putin was "pushing around" and criticizing for all the wrongs of this world domestically, Russia is dealing with someone who is by default incapable of granting Moscow what it wants: an unprofessional, emotional leader who is more likely to grant Ukraine offensive weaponry than help Rosneft get a fresh loan from a Western bank.

So forget about the handshakes and the smiles. It is impossible to translate Trump-Putin bonhomie, even if it will persist, into considerable gains for US-Russia cooperation and a wider state to state development of mutual trust and strategic partnership. The only question now is how long before one side stops pretending it is possible and the whole charade falls apart? Moscow is already [considering](#) the expulsion of 30 American diplomats and seizing US property in Russia as a response to similar actions ordered by Barack Obama back in 2016, which penalized Russia for its involvement in the US presidential elections.

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