

The Reality of Russia

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Every US President who has had to deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin began the relationship with high hopes. Successive American leaders were slow to catch on to what Putin really sought, however. He wants to be feared, unchallenged, able to lord over his neighbors. Putin only seeks cooperation with the US when it can help him.

Bill Clinton was fresh off a jovial relationship with Boris Yeltsin in 2000 when ever-closer US-Russian cooperation seemingly loomed. But Putin viewed the 1990s as a period of humiliation and soon told his military its mission included “restoring Russia’s honor and dignity.”

George W. Bush met Putin shortly after taking office in 2001. “I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy,” Bush declared. “I was able to get a sense of his soul.” Putin later launched cyberattacks on Estonia and defeated Georgia in a small war.

Barack Obama came to power determined to “reset” relations with Russia. Putin illegally seized Crimea, launched a shadowy war in Ukraine, attempted to delegitimize the US election, and used Russian airpower to brutally defend Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

Now it is Donald Trump’s turn. As President-elect, he often spoke glowingly of Putin while questioning the value of NATO.

Make no mistake: Putin will try to manipulate Trump.

Like Bush and Obama, Trump may be initially fooled by the scheming former KGB officer. Trump has a demonstrated fondness for strong personalities and is seemingly receptive to flattery. But he has other personality traits that could serve the US very well.

Trump prides himself on his deal-making talents and will not stand for being made to look weak. Putin’s idea of a reset would be a blatantly bad deal of the sort Trump despises—Putin wishes for Russia not to be punished for its aggressions and to keep what it has stolen.

Clearly, Russia needs a fresh start with the US far more than the US needs another reset with Russia, so Trump begins his presidency from a bargaining position of power. As he wrote in his 2015 book, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*, “Remember the principle strategy of negotiation: The side that needs the deal the most is the one that should walk away with the least.”

What does Putin want? Well, he recently demanded a reduction in the US military presence in NATO’s eastern nations, an end to sanctions, and quite comically, called for the US to compensate Russia for the economic losses that came from those sanctions. Putin also craves endorsement over Crimea.

What will Putin offer? Not much of lasting value. He can promise cooperation fighting terrorists, but in Syria Putin

Every American President has wanted better US-Russia relations. Putin does not.

rarely attacked ISIS while working to create a puppet state in Damascus. He could offer to negotiate a new Iran nuclear deal, but Russia itself has recently violated or abrogated several international agreements.

And Putin will surely turn on Trump if he needs the US as a scapegoat to shore up his popularity at home.

If Trump is conned into a bad deal with Putin, the US will have damaged NATO, upended the international order by bargaining away Ukrainian territory, and damaged the US by weakening some of its staunchest allies and trading partners.

Instead, Trump should demand that Russia honor the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, cease its unpredictable and threatening military actions near America’s allies, end cyberattacks on the US, and get out of Ukraine. If Russia will not comply, Trump should reinforce the allies in Eastern Europe and ratchet up sanctions against Russia. Putin understands strength and will only respect the US when forced to do so.

“Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power,” Thucydides wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, because “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.”

The US has worked for 75 years to alter this brutal dynamic by defending freedom, security, and economic growth in Europe. Russia has shown a desire to bully, intimidate, overwhelm, and kill the weak.

Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Finland have much to fear from Russia, as they lack NATO protection. Without American leadership, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland will also have much to fear.

Putin plays nice with US presidents while it works to his advantage, but will push until he is stopped. It is up to NATO, the US—and President Trump—to stop him. ★



Kremlin photo

Putin wants amnesty for theft and aggressions.