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## What Trump Gets Right About Russia

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Germany's first chancellor Otto von Bismarck famously remarked that the secret of politics is to make a good treaty with Russia. Although short-lived, the Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia in 1887 sought to delineate the spheres of influence of the two countries and remain neutral in the event of war with a third great power. Although it is popular wisdom that mutual interests in international politics are bound solely by realpolitik, the fact that the two 19th century great power rivals even engaged in a brief détente is an essential lesson in present-day geopolitics. In today's time, the equivalent would be the geopolitical stakes for U.S. and Russia with an influential power like China coming of age. Having presided over China's staggering rise, great powers like U.S. and Russia now have to adjust to China's consolidation in international politics increasingly. There has never been a more opportune moment for the Western countries led by the U.S. to accommodate Russia as a means to weather the might of China. However, the West continues to

alienate the Russians primarily as a punishment for its invasion of Crimea in 2014.

Today, the anti-Russia rhetoric is at an all-time high. With Moscow's continued military involvement in Crimea, allegations of election hacking and the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the U.K., the Western countries have virtually shut the doors on any meaningful engagement with its supposed adversary. However, U.S. President Donald Trump has a different take. In the recently concluded G7 Summit, Trump at a press conference questioned the continued absence of Russia by stating that 'it would be better to have Russia inside the tent than outside the tent.'<sup>1</sup>

Trump's stated position represents an important albeit controversial phase in U.S. policy towards Russia. The President's avowed soft corner for President Putin is ruffling quite a few feathers amongst U.S. allies, the Washington establishment, and media. However, the strategy is in plain sight for everyone to witness: the accommodation of Russia is in U.S. national

interest. Despite concerns raised by the likes of Germany, France, and Britain, Trump is inclined to fast track Russia's possible inclusion into the G7 (thereby reverting to the G8) by the time of the next summit. Inevitably, such a posture would entail consequences for future U.S. policy towards Russia.

Notwithstanding the termination of the INF Treaty, U.S. and Russia have a deep-seated interest in managing China's strategic capabilities. It is an open secret that the disinterest with the treaty stemmed from the restrictions it placed on the two countries while allowing China to develop its missile forces. With the geopolitical shift to the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. believes that the INF Treaty was putting it at a disadvantage compared to China, which is rapidly modernizing and currently has 95% of its ballistic and cruise missile inventory in the INF range.<sup>2</sup> As China gets drawn into nuclear arms discourses, it would certainly put pressure on them to recognize the threat perceptions it faces.

Given Western and U.S. sanctions since the Ukrainian crisis, Russia has had no choice but to increase its dependence on China. Whether the prevailing situation bodes well for a future Sino-Russian alliance is too early to tell and perhaps even unlikely as some have argued.<sup>3</sup> The question the U.S. needs to be asking is whether the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis should preclude engagement with Russia. Trump seems to have understood the wisdom of bringing Russia into the U.S. fold with no strings attached.

From the Indo-Pacific to the Iran deal, the U.S. realizes Russia's stakes on issues of strategic concern. While the two have mostly locked horns in conflicts ranging from Syria, Venezuela and Kosovo, their convergence of interests in matters like the future stability of Afghanistan or counter-terrorism should be incentive enough to strive for cooperation.

Despite the rhetoric surrounding the termination of the INF Treaty, US-Russian relations could be on the upswing based on some underlying interests. After the U.S. and Russia made their intentions clear, observers fear that both countries would be in the midst of a new nuclear arms race. As the relative value of arms control treaties has to be both mutual and as per changing strategic realities, it is now incumbent upon the two parties to address the only remaining treaty that seeks to limit their capabilities, i.e., the New START Treaty.

Set to expire in 2021, the New START Treaty addresses limits on the number of nuclear warheads and bombs (1550); Deployed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers (700); Deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and bombers (800) permitted for the two sides.<sup>4</sup> With the demise of the INF Treaty, one wonders if U.S. and Russia can hold sway over each other anymore. However, Trump seeks to achieve precisely that – try to achieve mutually

defined interests that do not impact their strategic position vis-à-vis China.

Despite calling it “a bad deal negotiated by the [Barack] Obama administration” in his very first phone-call as President to his Russian counterpart Putin<sup>5</sup>, Trump is interested in decreasing tensions between U.S. and Russia. If re-elected, Trump is likely to indicate to Russia that its long-term nuclear strategic capabilities are aimed towards China. This would not only assuage Russian fears in the nuclear arms domain but provide them with an independent foreign policy perspective in dealing with both the U.S. and China. Russia should know better than to put all its eggs in one basket (so far in China’). It is in this context that Trump appears to signal his sympathies towards Russia. A great start to this would be to revise, if need be, the terms of the New START Treaty or extend it for another five years as the provision allows. Given the uncertainties of a multi-polar world, it is in the best interest of both the U.S. and Russia to bury the hatchet and look for ways to cooperate. Bismarck’s words ring truer now than ever before.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Collinson, “Trump’s strange relationship with Putin is back in the spotlight”, CNN, August 28, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/28/politics/donald-trump-russia-vladimir-putin-g7-golf-resort-2020-election/index.html>, accessed on August 29, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Rakesh Sood, “An end to arms control consensus”, The Hindu, August 24, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/an-end-to-arms-control-consensus/article29236033.ece?homepage=true>, accessed on August 29, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Leon Aron, “Are Russia and China Really Forming an Alliance?”, Foreign Affairs, April 04, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-04-04/are-russia-and-china-really-forming-alliance>, accessed on August 29, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Kingston Reif, “New START at a Glance”, Arms Control Association, March 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NewSTART>, accessed on August 29, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Landay and David Rohde, “Exclusive: In call with Putin, Trump denounced Obama-era nuclear arms treaty – sources”, Reuters, February 09, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-putin/exclusive-in-call-with-putin-trump-denounced-obama-era-nuclear-arms-treaty-sources-idUSKBN1502A5>, accessed on August 29, 2019