

Confidential

RUSSIA

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Vladimir Orlov reports from Geneva:

TRUMP, RUSSIA, AND A NARROW WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

SUMMARY

The dust is slowly settling after the announcement of the U.S. presidential election results - but the question of "Who is Mr. Trump?" remains open. The answer will determine the outlook for U.S.-Russian relations for years to come.

Vladimir Orlov, director of the Geneva-based Centre russe d'études politiques and founder of the PIR Center (now serving as its advisor), reckons that the Trump presidency opens up a window of opportunity - though admittedly a very narrow one - to turn the "crisis management" page in bilateral relations and start reducing tensions between Russia and the United States. He highlights seven key areas for a resumption of strategic dialogue, stressing that they will require political will from both sides and a genuine reset of bilateral relations rather than mere declarations.

Dr. Orlov believes that realistic goals in the immediate term include scaling down the confrontation, resurrecting bilateral strategic dialogue, and laying the ground for future progress in several specific areas. He warns, however, against harboring any illusions of a "full reconciliation", arguing that Russia and the United States will remain antagonists on the 21st-century international arena, and that their national interests will diverge more often than not.

Donald Trump's victory in the recent U.S. presidential election came out of the blue for many experts, including those who saw more pros than cons in his candidacy. The portrait of the president-elect is painted very differently in the Russian and European media. In Europe, the epithets used to describe him range the somewhat narrow gamut from "unpredictable" to "terrible". In Russia, however, the media - especially television - sometimes view him as a Santa Claus lugging a sack full of gifts for Russia. Superimposing these two very different views gives us the figure of a Santa dressed up for Halloween, with unnerving implications for the contents of the sack.

So who is Mr. Trump?

Let us begin from establishing that Trump is not in fact terrible. He is rather a pragmatist, outwardly eccentric and fond of punchy soundbites - but those soundbites do not necessarily translate into actual policy. Second, he is definitely not a Santa Claus, and even if he has a sack full of gifts, those are clearly not meant for Russia. Russians are fondly deluding themselves that relations with their country were the central plank of Mr. Trump's entire campaign, and that Russia is always at the forefront of the president-elect's mind. That is narcissistic claptrap that must be debunked as soon as possible, lest the disillusion proves too bitter to swallow.

Donald Trump's program is centered firmly on the United States. It is a program about America and for America. It relegates foreign affairs to Page 2 of the list of priorities, with Russia somewhere near the bottom of that list. For Trump, the issue of relations with Russia is not quite marginal, but certainly peripheral.

Is this good or bad for Russia, and for Russian-U.S. dialogue?

The answer to that question is neither. The situation is neutral, and the balance of the scale can easily tip to either side. Nevertheless, I will go out on a limb and say that in terms of Russia's interests, Donald Trump's victory is the lesser of the two evils.

Had Hillary Clinton won, the situation would have taken an entirely predictable downward trajectory. The two countries would have continued to sever their remaining bilateral ties. All the existing problems in their relations - i.e. Ukraine, Snowden, the Middle East, human rights, etc. - would still be there, and new ones would surely emerge as time went by. Back in October, when my students asked me incredulously if that is conceivable that Russian-U.S. relations could get even worse, I had to say to them, "You have no idea just how bad it can get", offering the analysis of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis as a case in point. It is quite telling in itself that history books once again offer entirely plausible scenarios for the day after tomorrow.

Had Hillary Clinton won, Russian-U.S. relations would have been firmly in the crisis management mode. The victory of Donald Trump means that such a scenario is no longer a foregone conclusion. Now we have alternatives. It's not a breakthrough, but it's a chance.

Where should Russia focus its efforts after Trump's inauguration on January 20 to reduce the ongoing confrontation?

- **First**, we should aim to work together against terrorism. The potential for such cooperation emerged 15 years ago after 9/11 - and incidentally, there was also a Republican administration in Washington at the time. That huge potential, however, was left untapped. In fact, it has now been completely sidelined amid

squabbling over which parties in Syria should be regarded as terrorists. Trump has both the opportunity and the need to rise above that nonsensical bickering initiated by his predecessor, define the goals America shares with Russia, designate common targets, and start striking those targets together. After all, international terrorism is the enemy at the gate for both our countries. It is in our shared national interests to strike that enemy down - which is entirely possible if Russia and the United States pool their resources.

- **Second**, we should work together on strategic nuclear arms control. Our two countries are now implementing the New START treaty; it is hard to name any other area of bilateral relations still unaffected by the bilateral crisis. The New START is a good treaty - but it does not go far enough. Russia and the United States still control more than 95 per cent of the global nuclear weapons stockpiles. They have more than enough nukes to guarantee their own security and maintain their nuclear deterrence capability. This is well understood in both capitals. Nevertheless, progress on arms control has stalled. We should lay the ground for negotiations on a new treaty that would mandate deeper cuts in offensive weapons and address the sensitive unresolved issue of defensive weapons, including U.S. missile defense plans.
- **Third**, Russia and the United States should do their utmost to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. A solid foundation has already been laid for efforts in this area. In 1968, despite the confrontation over the deployment of Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and the United States became the founding fathers of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The NPT has even been called by some a *Soviet-American condominium*, even though it now has more than 180 members. We are living in a new century and a new millennium; many milestones have come and gone, but the treaty is still alive and bearing fruit (suffice to recall the recent diplomatic *taming* of the Iranian nuclear program). Nevertheless, a new Cold War between Russia and the West could well lead to cracks appearing in the treaty's foundation. Nuclear proliferation is equally dangerous for both our countries. Trump and Putin should pool their efforts to keep the NPT afloat.
- **Fourth**, preventing an arms race in cyberspace and the outer space is a key priority.

New types of weapons are already poised to make a leap to the outer space - and not all of them are American or Russian. A new actor, China, has emerged to rival them both in that area, and others are not far behind. It is in both Russia's and America's interests to prevent the outer space from becoming another arena of military rivalry, or the next big cash cow for the defense industry. In fact, things in this area have gone so far out of hand that I am not even sure whether we can put this genie back in the bottle.

The same, incidentally, is true of cyberspace. The Americans are exploring it in exactly the same way they once explored the Wild West. They were the first player to enter that game, and they now believe that might makes right, refusing to accept any rules of engagement whatsoever. Edward Snowden's revelations, which left everyone somewhat shell-shocked, were merely the tip of the iceberg. Come to think of it, the American whistleblower (who still lives in Russia, and who is still regarded as a criminal in the United States, although that can yet change) blew up Russian-U.S. relations to a no lesser degree than the crisis in Ukraine did. The only difference is that the detonation took place underground and thus remained mostly invisible to a casual observer. It did, however, have some very damaging visible effects, such as President Obama's decision to cancel his visit to Russia. And lately, Russia itself has been accused of making mischief in U.S. cyberspace. It is important for everyone to stop before we pass the point of no return. The situation in cyberspace is far too close to a war of everyone against everyone else.

It is not by accident that the World Economic Forum has already highlighted cybersecurity as one of the key threats facing our planet. Putin and Trump have all the reasons to take a joint lead in producing binding international rules of the game in this area.

- **Fifth**, we need a new security architecture on the European continent. Unlike Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump is not firmly entrenched on the issue. Putin can and should talk with his new U.S. counterpart about building effective confidence measures in Europe, reducing the risk of military incidents in the border areas between Russia and NATO, assuring Ukraine's neutral and unaligned status, and upholding that country's unity with the help of a joint (Russian-European-U.S.) economic rehabilitation project. Progress here will depend, however, on a clear understanding that the issue of Crimea was decided, firmly and irreversibly, by the Crimeans themselves at the 2014 referendum. It appears that Trump's closest advisors are prepared to turn a blind eye on Crimea, although such a stance is unlikely to be announced officially. There is also the possibility of initiating a constructive dialogue on conventional arms control in Europe; that possibility will become more distinct if such a dialogue is supported in the main European capitals, especially in Paris after the upcoming French presidential election.
- **Sixth**, Russia and the United States can work together on putting out the various *conflagrations* in the Middle East. Once again, unlike Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump is free of the baggage of the previous administrations. He can rethink America's policy on Syria, Libya, and Iraq. He can distance himself from the aggressive and unhinged Saudi Arabia. For its own part, Moscow would surely be prepared to listen to the same people in Israel who now have Donald Trump's ear. In this particular area, however, much will depend on the precise composition of the president-elect's team, and on their Middle Eastern ideas and phobias. Trump may yet slip on the Middle Eastern problem, just like many Republican and Democrat presidents did before him. It would be very worrying if his current harsh rhetoric on Iran were to begin translating into actual policy. After all, Iran could be a valuable partner for both Russia and the United States in fighting terrorism and reducing the potential for conflict in the Middle East. Otherwise, Russia's and America's paths in the region will have to diverge.
- **Seventh** and last (but not least), the two countries should put an end to their puerile exchange of sanctions and countersanctions, and begin revitalizing their trade, economic, and humanitarian cooperation. To remain relevant to each other, and to keep the cord of bilateral strategic cooperation from snapping, Russia and the United States must be closely tied together (but not hidebound, as is the case with America and China) by trade. A bilateral lobby based on mutual economic interest will prevent another acrimonious split between our two countries. Meanwhile, based on the statistics for the first eight months of 2016, Russia sells about as much of its goods and services to America as it does to Kazakhstan or Poland. Its imports twice as much stuff from Germany and three times as much from China as it does from the United States. As for humanitarian cooperation, it should begin from youth and journalistic exchanges. It is important for these exchanges to be bilateral; there has been so much scaremongering on both sides in recent years that even Suslov and McCarthy would envy the lurid detail.

The above list of seven priority areas of cooperation to restore strategic dialogue between Moscow and Washington is not exhaustive. But these are the areas that hold a realistic promise of success - and I have no interest in theorizing about pies in the sky. Real progress, however, will require a political will on both sides - and yes, it will require a *Reset*. The word has been ridiculed within an inch of its life, and

rightly so. Donald Trump couldn't help grimacing when a journalist used it in a recent interview. Well, no problem here: we can find a new word, or a well-forgotten old one (what about détente?) The point, however, is that we need a genuine - and not merely verbal - reset of our bilateral relations.

A reset will be required on both sides. There can be no unilateral resets, they are nothing but illusion.

Speaking of illusions, I would like to make something very clear. We can reasonably hope for the toning down of our confrontation with the United States. We can lay the ground for future progress in specific individual areas. But let us not forget one thing: Russia and America are bound by their joint responsibility as the two nuclear superpowers for the future of the mankind - but they are also bound to be antagonists on the 21st-century international arena. Our countries' national interests will continue to diverge more often than not. Our views of the international system, the world order, truth, and justice, are diametrically opposed.

Trump or Clinton are mere details in the greater scheme of things, in which Russia and Trumplinton's America have very different paths.

With this clear realization, Russia has a lot of hard and painstaking homework to do - which must be done without delay, during the Trump presidency, and specifically during his first year in office - to further strengthen our strategic relationship with our eastern neighbor China, and to repair the damage done to our relations with our western neighbor Europe. We don't need any help from the Americans to do that, and we can surely cope with whatever obstacles they may choose to erect on our way to that goal. The reverse, however, is very true: only good-neighborly relations with both China and Europe will enable Russia to deal with the United States in a confident and assertive manner.

So, is it true that the Trump victory has opened up a window of opportunity for Russia's relations with America and Europe? Not quite. The window is so narrow that it looks more like a cat flap, and it's been left ajar for a while rather than being thrown wide open. Whatever can squeeze through had better do it quickly, before the flap is sealed shut once again.

The author of this article is Dr. Vladimir Orlov, the founder of PIR Center, where he now serves as an advisor. Dr. Orlov is also the director of the Geneva-based Centre russe d'études politiques.

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Dmitry Polikanov