

## Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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Russian-American relations have been characterized by a high level of mistrust since the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The "vanquished" treatment Russia felt was reserved to her, corroborated by American actions and positions perceived as detrimental to her own vital interests, like NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe to former Soviet countries and the support to the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine, contributed to feed a sense of isolation and unfair marginalization in respect to her role as a world power. During short periods of time, there were détente phases, as in the case of the *reset* initiated by secretary of State Hillary Clinton in March 2009, which did not last long however as new estrangement reasons emerged quickly.

This framework sets the scenery for the deterioration of bilateral relations emerging from the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support to separatist forces of Eastern Ukraine. Economic sanctions and *ad personam* that followed, put in place by president Barack Obama's administration and United States' western partners, further reduced the margin to recreate the basic conditions to resume dialog.

However, judging by the reciprocal flattering declaration by president-elect Donald Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin in the past months, a measured phase of détente would seem to be initiating. For example, during the campaign, Russian president declared he appreciated the "great control on his country" exercised by Trump, qualified of a "better leader than president Obama" and with whom he would have liked to collaborate towards the defeat of the Islamic State. On November 14, less than a week before his victory in the American presidential elections, Trump and Putin had a first telephone conversation giving the first indication of what relation the two men might have in the future. The public report, released by the Kremlin states that Putin congratulated Trump on his victory and wished him success in carrying out his electoral program, declaring himself ready to develop with the new administration a partnership dialog based on principles of equality, mutual respect and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Both Putin and Trump agreed on the utter dissatisfaction regarding the bilateral relation, declaring they are ready to take the necessary steps in order to normalize the relation and reach constructive cooperation on as many issues as possible. Both of them emphasized on the importance of establishing the basis of renewed bilateral relations in the trade and economic fields, highlighting that 2017 will mark the 210th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations between Russia and the United States, an encouraging anniversary towards the return of pragmatic and mutually beneficial relations but also with positive results for global stability and security. The report concludes on the auspice the two presidents will be able to work together both against the common (and main) menace that are international terrorism and extremism, and towards a solution for the Syrian crisis.

In an interview to the State television NTV, president Putin stated that Trump "is already a statesman, is the leader of the United States of America, one of the most prominent countries in the World... Considering he's also a successful businessman, he is an intelligent man. And if he is an intelligent man, he will fully and pretty quickly understand his new level of responsibility." Putin continued saying Russia was not seeking conflict against anyone and did not need enemies but rather friends, and he is ready to work together with the new American administration, with which he shares the responsibility to guarantee international security. On the other hand, he added, America's attempt to create a unipolar world (that is, with only one state dominating economy, military and cultural fields) had failed. One of the most highlighted parts by president Putin is the one regarding a possible collaboration with the United States in the fight against international terrorism in Syria, "a real enemy, not an imaginary one". Most of all, Putin's expectations regarding the new administration are summarized in the warning that he is not going to allow the United

States to treat Moscow as an unequal partner, attitude repeatedly adopted during the Obama presidency, on the Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian war.

Trump commented positively the Russian president's respect towards him, highlighting his "82% approval rating. I think when he calls me brilliant I'll take the compliment okay?"

For the moment, however, various critics seem to scale down the optimism the apparent thaw in relations between Russian and the United States generated in various circles. The first glaring divergence took shape in the new administration's stance towards Iran, close ally of Moscow and prominent actor in the Syrian crisis, to whom Trump already anticipated a strengthening of the sanctions and terms of the nuclear deal. But, above all, the remaining question is, will Russia be satisfied by America's new course of action in treating them as equal partner? The recurring sense of isolation and encirclement of Russia characterized for decades East-West relations and was recently at the root of some choices leading her to express assertive positions every time she felt her interests were threatened (Crimea, eastern Ukraine, NATO's enlargement, implementation of missile defense in Eastern Europe...). Furthermore, despite Putin and Trump's declaration of mutual respect might create a positive basis towards the improvement of bilateral relations, the fact remains that those are only declaration of intent and preliminary expression of mutual respect. For any practical application of the positive gestures shown by the two leaders up until now, it is necessary to wait for the new American president to be sworn in, on January 20, 2017. Only from this point onward will it be possible to witness whether or not there is room for a renewed Russian-American partnership and what consequences it will bear on the balance (or imbalance) of the quadrants in which presidents Putin and Trump will embed their decisions.