



A Genuine U.S. Reset With Russia Is Long Overdue

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Russian President Vladimir Putin says he looks forward to “building a constructive dialogue between Moscow and Washington.” (WikiMedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin-6.jpg))

As a young Marine Corps officer in the 1980s, I was assigned to a nuclear-capable artillery battalion. Our mission was to provide general support to Marine expeditionary forces called upon to implement various contingencies central to American national security. Two of these contingencies—northern Europe and Iran—were of particular interest, since they involved direct conflict with Soviet forces.

As the battalion intelligence officer, I was heavily involved in implementing a training program that prepared our Marines to fight, survive and prevail on the field of battle. The battalion commander and I participated as observers in the U.S. Army's OPFOR (opposing force) program at Fort Irwin, Calif., where American soldiers had the opportunity to train against a Soviet-style enemy. We trained to shoot, move and communicate on a sustained basis (i.e., 24 hours a day, for days on end) in a fluid battlefield environment. We incorporated innovative tactics designed to maximize mobility and rapidity of operations in an effort to offset Soviet numerical superiority.

The end result was always the same. In Fort Irwin, the Soviet-style OPFOR overran its American opponents using steamroller tactics that emphasized mass over finesse. In our own training exercises, Marine artillery batteries would, one by one, be locked onto and destroyed by simulated Soviet counterfire. And in the larger exercises, the scenarios inevitably terminated with the last surviving artillery pieces firing tactical nuclear weapons as a last-ditch effort to halt the inexorable Soviet advance.

A few years later, in 1987, I was assigned as an arms control inspector to help implement the historic [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](http://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm) (<http://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>) between the U.S. and the then-Soviet Union, overseeing the elimination of an entire class of nuclear weapons and establishing a foundation of inspection-based disarmament that would help facilitate verifiable arms control between these two nuclear-armed superpowers for years to come. I was an active participant in this process, inspecting intercontinental ballistic missiles as they exited the factory gates, and later at their deployment bases.

This inspection process engendered confidence, from both the U.S. and Soviet Union, in disarmament processes that sought to limit the numbers of these powerful weapons. As a former cold warrior on the front line of the U.S.-Soviet global faceoff, I saw the stark (and meaningful) contrast between confrontation and cooperation.

Later, in the aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, I had the opportunity, as a United Nations weapons inspector, to work hand in hand on disarming Iraq with the same Russian military officers and technicians whom I had at one time trained to fight. My personal journey from

confronting the “Evil Empire” to being an active “partner in peace” was, I believed, complete. Never again would American children need to learn about “duck and cover” or European children have to labor under the threat of imminent nuclear destruction.

In the years since then, I have witnessed a general degradation of relations between the U.S. and Russia. The expansion of NATO into the territories of the former Warsaw Pact, coupled with NATO expansion into the former Soviet Baltic Republics (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) seemed unduly aggressive, given the fact that NATO’s *raison d’être* was the containment and deterrent of the Soviet Union. The unabashed support of so-called “color revolutions” by the United States and NATO in territories Russia considered to be integral to its national security and identity (the “Rose Revolution” of 2003 in Georgia and the “Orange Revolution” of 2004-2005 in Ukraine) was the precursor to the rapid deterioration of relations between Russia and Europe and America that culminated in the Georgian-Russian War of 2008 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The Russian actions in both Georgia and Ukraine have fundamentally altered the trajectory of relations with the U.S. and Europe. An American anti-missile defense base has been established on the territory of Romania, over Russian objections. Fears of Russian aggression targeting the Baltic republics and Poland have led to the forward deployment of American and NATO military assets into those regions as a deterrent. For a former Marine who remembers the debate about missile defense shields and was an eyewitness to the return of forces to Germany (the [Reforged](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exercise_Reforged) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exercise_Reforged) exercises that were the hallmark of America’s commitment to the defense of Europe in the 1980s), the events unfolding in Europe today seem like nightmarish *déjà vu*.

This sense of dread is furthered by the reality that these actions by the U.S. and NATO are not taking place in a vacuum. Rather, the actions have triggered the geopolitical equivalent of [Newton’s second law of physics](http://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/newtlaws/Lesson-3/Newton-s-Second-Law) (<http://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/newtlaws/Lesson-3/Newton-s-Second-Law>) —for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Russian tactical, nuclear-capable missiles have been forward deployed, targeting not only the American anti-missile base in Romania, but also the cities of eastern and central Europe. Two armies, disbanded in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, have been reactivated, organized and equipped for the kind of offensive-minded warfare unseen in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the American and NATO forces being deployed in the Baltics and Poland are not capable of defeating these newly modernized Russian forces. If a general ground war broke out in Europe, the only thing that would be able to stop a Russian advance would be a tactical nuclear weapon. The world has come full circle since the mid-1980s.

The administration of President Barack Obama undertook an abortive effort at resetting U.S.-Russian relations in 2009, when then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented her Russian counterpart with a misspelled “reset” button (<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/03/06/clinton-reset-button-gift-to-russian-fm-gets-lost-in-translation/>) . But this diplomatic outreach floundered under the weight of the fundamental differences in approach between Obama, who viewed Russia as a “regional power” that acts out against its neighbors “not out of strength, but

weakness,” and President Vladimir Putin, who has declared that the dissolution of the former Soviet Union represented “the greatest geopolitical disaster” of the 20th century. These contrasting historical perspectives led to a situation where the U.S. underestimated the extent to which Russia both felt threatened by, and resented, American policy initiatives in Eastern Europe and the Russian “near abroad.”

In the closing months of the Obama administration, relations with Russia have deteriorated to the extent that people talk about the advent of a “new Cold War.” The Russian military intervention in Syria, begun in 2015, has fundamentally altered the strategic posture of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Any meaningful American military operations against the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, whether through the imposition of a no-fly zone over northern Syria or air strikes against the Syrian Army, would lead to a shooting war with Russia.

The high-profile hacking of the Democratic Party’s servers—and the subsequent release of stolen emails to WikiLeaks, designed to influence public opinion during a presidential election—was publicly blamed on Russia by the Obama administration, despite the admitted lack of substantive intelligence proving such a link. Accusations of Russian interference in the American political process followed, and Vice President Joe Biden went so far as to allude to imminent offensive cyberattacks by the U.S. against Russia—something that would constitute an act of war.

Into this poisonous environment stepped Donald J. Trump, the bombastic and unpredictable nominee of the Republican Party who had, throughout his candidacy, had the audacity to declare that he wanted “a better relationship with everybody. And with Russia, yeah ... if we can get along with Russia, that’s very good.” He echoed this philosophy during his election victory speech. “[W]e will always put America’s interests first, we will deal fairly with everyone, with everyone,” the president-elect said. “All people and all other nations. We will seek common ground, not hostility, partnership, not conflict.”

In response, Putin noted that he looked forward to “building a constructive dialogue between Moscow and Washington, based on principles of equality, mutual respect and each other’s positions.”

Whether a Trump administration will be able to bridge the significant gaps that exist between the U.S. and Russia on complex issues—such as the annexation of Crimea, Georgian territorial integrity (Russia has lent its support to minority secessionist movements in the [Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia)), arms control, Middle East security and the inherent friction of Russian pushback to an expansive NATO—has yet to be seen.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. Putin [called President-elect Trump](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/11/14/trump-faces-backlash-over-appointing-bannon-as-a-top-aide-a-choice-critics-say-will-empower-white-nationalists/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/11/14/trump-faces-backlash-over-appointing-bannon-as-a-top-aide-a-choice-critics-say-will-empower-white-nationalists/>) and offered his congratulations. According to the Kremlin, the two discussed the “unsatisfactory nature” of U.S.-Russia relations and the need to work together to improve them. The Trump transition team released a statement noting that the two

spoke on “a range of issues, including the threats and challenges facing the United States and Russia, strategic economic issues and the historical U.S.-Russia relationship that dates back over 200 years.”

The same day as this phone call, Obama, in a news conference, announced that he would be travelling to Europe, where he would deliver a message that a Trump administration would remain committed to the NATO alliance. The ability to balance improvement in U.S.-Russian relations with a strong trans-Atlantic alliance—something that has escaped successive presidential administrations since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—represents a level of pragmatism that has been decidedly lacking in American foreign policy formulation.

One of Trump’s weaknesses is his absolute disconnect with the foreign and national security policy establishment that has guided successive presidential administrations since the end of World War II, leading many to question whether he has the combination of knowledge, experience and gravitas to deal with an issue as complex as U.S.-Russian relations and the NATO alliance. But this perceived weakness is also Trump’s greatest potential strength—his absolute liberation from the intellectual hobbles imposed by the closed-minded, lock-step policy prescriptions these institutions promote and impose.

Today, the foreign policy playbook calls for confrontation, containment and isolation of Russia. This is a terrifying proposition. Somewhere in Europe today is a young Army or Air Force officer who has been forward deployed as part the NATO “tripwire” in the Baltics. This officer knows all too well that the Russians would slice through the assembled American and NATO forces like a hot knife through butter, and that ultimately the only thing that would stop the Russians from punching into the heart of Europe would be the employment of tactical nuclear weapons.

I’ve been there, done that, and have the T-shirt to prove it. For this reason alone, President-elect Trump’s willingness to break with the foreign and national security establishment’s playbook, and seek to normalize relations with Russia, is a welcome development. The time for a genuine reset with Russia is long overdue, not just for old cold warriors like me, but for anyone who is vested in a better future for the U.S., Europe and the world.

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