



Russia Feels American Pressure

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russian-US relations have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. President Donald Trump has signed a new package of anti-Russian sanctions into law and increased the US military presence across former Soviet territory and eastern Europe. He also sent VP Mike Pence on a tour of Estonia, Montenegro, and Georgia – a trip viewed by Moscow as western encroachment on an area it considers a buffer zone. This standoff does not mean the two superpowers will not be able to find common ground in other areas, but the potential for cooperation is limited. Former Soviet territory will likely remain a major confrontation line between the US and Russia.

Recent tensions between Moscow and Washington could drive the two superpowers to a deadlock. On July 30, Russia retaliated against the US by ordering 755 American diplomats to leave the country. Moscow's move came after Washington toughened its own anti-Russia sanctions (although the Russian move was intended more as a countermeasure against former US President Barack Obama's expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats in late 2016).

Moscow cannot afford to impose serious countersanctions, as they would cause greater harm to the much-troubled Russian economy than they would to the US. Consider, for example, the case of NASA, which depends largely on Russian engines. Stopping their export could cause significant difficulties for the US aerospace industry, but for the Russian economy, it would represent a loss of approximately \$1 billion in revenues in a couple of years.

The relationship, troubled as it is, has not necessarily hit rock bottom. On August 1, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, "the [US-Russia] relationship was at a historic low since the end of the Cold War, and it could get worse." On

August 3, Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev tweeted that any hope for improvement in relations was lost with Trump's sanctions.

There are reasons for Moscow to be worried. American politicians openly state how supportive the US will be towards eastern European countries and Georgia in the event that Russia increases its military capabilities in the region. This US resolve was highlighted recently when VP Mike Pence visited Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro.

A steady US/NATO military and security buildup is underway in eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Georgia, for example, hosted the biggest military exercises ever held on its soil, in which US forces took part along with other allies. Washington has also outlined its position that any progress with Moscow would depend entirely upon the latter's ceasing its military and financial support for pro-Russia separatists in east Ukraine, Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

Rather than compromise, the Russians have in fact expanded their military bases in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and other breakaway territories across the former Soviet space. As an international relations realist, Putin knows the only hope of pressuring Washington is to gain an advantage in other theaters where Moscow has significant political leverage.

However, despite strained relations, Moscow and Washington still share similar – if limited – perspectives in several areas. Syria is first among several potential points of cooperation. Russia and the US share a vision of defeating ISIS, and there was even a joint announcement of a ceasefire in southwestern Syria in early July. To both countries' credit, the ceasefire still holds.

East of the Syrian battlefield, Afghanistan could be another theater for cooperation. Russia fears a spillover of militancy from both the Taliban and ISIS across the Afghan border into Central Asia, and would not oppose a US presence in Afghanistan as a bulwark against it.

Yet another geographic area of possible Russian-American cooperation could be the Korean peninsula, where the situation is heating up. The Pyongyang leadership is rigorously pursuing its nuclear program and has made significant progress in successfully testing its ICBM. Both Moscow and Washington are concerned that North Korea's military capabilities could deal a final blow to the policy of non-proliferation.

However, there are limits to these areas of converging interests. In Syria, for instance, Russia's grand strategy of linking the Syrian crisis with the Ukrainian one in order to gain diplomatic advantage in negotiations with the west has

failed. In Afghanistan, the US suspects Moscow of providing military support to the Taliban, while in North Korea, Washington does not openly rely on Russian support. Washington recently criticized both Moscow and Beijing for not doing enough to stop the North Korean nuclear program.

Russian-US relations have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. There do exist several theaters in which the two superpowers can work together, but there are significant limits that will block any breakthroughs. There is thus little possibility for any rapprochement between the two powers across the former Soviet space. Different geopolitical readings on Ukraine, Georgia, and wider eastern European security make near-term progress in Russia-US relations improbable at best.

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