

Mark D. Simakovsky, Daniel P. Vajdich

Trump Should Not Have Met with Russia's Foreign Minister

Way to give Vladimir Putin exactly what he wants, Mr. President

Трампу не треба було зустрічатися з міністром закордонних справ Росії

Це шлях, щоб дати Володимирі Путіну те саме, що він хоче, Пане Президент

Глава МЗС РФ Лавров прибув до Вашингтона, осідлавши хвилю російської дипломатичної активності, яка покликана зміцнити позиції Кремля в Сирії, в Україні, в Північній Кореї і на європейському континенті в цілому. Цей візит Лаврова в США автори називають ознакою того, що американо-російські двосторонні консультації, мабуть, увінчаються особистою зустріччю президентів Трампа і Путіна. Але Трампу не треба було піддаватися спокусі – не треба було зустрічатися з Лавровим. Перш ніж сідати за стіл переговорів з Лавровим, президенту Трампу слід розробити всеосяжну політику і стратегію щодо Росії. Зараз така політика і стратегія відсутні, що вельми небезпечно. Автори радять адміністрації Трампа підвищити рівень своєї залученості в питання України і натиснути на Росію, вимагаючи, щоб та виконала свої зобов'язання щодо припинення вогню в якості попередньої умови хоч чогось схожого на поліпшення двосторонніх зв'язків. Якщо США наївно змиряться з путінським підпорядкуванням України (ймовірно, натомість на часткове або непослідовне співробітництво в Сирії), послідує такий ефект «хвилі», що сьогоднішня обстановка в світі здасться спокійною в порівнянні з завтрашньою.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/10/trump-should-not-have-met-with-russias-foreign-minister/>

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov came to Washington this week riding a wave of Russian diplomatic activity to strengthen the Kremlin's position in Syria, Ukraine, North Korea, and across the wider European continent. The visit is both a surprise and a warning — indicating that U.S.-Russia bilateral consultations are ripening and will likely culminate in a summit this summer between President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart, President Vladimir Putin.

But Trump should have avoided the temptation to meet with Foreign Minister Lavrov today during his visit to the United States, instead allowing Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to take the reins while assessing what exactly Moscow wants from a leadership summit. Even more importantly, Trump needs to define what the United States seeks to achieve, whether those objectives are realistically attainable, and whether they serve long-term U.S. interests. Using means without clear ends is destined to result in disaster. Before President Trump sat down with Lavrov, he should have first devised a comprehensive Russia policy and strategy, which is dangerously absent at the moment.

As he does this, Trump would be wise to reflect on Russia's recent actions. Last month, Trump chose to launch 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles into Syria after Bashar al-Assad's forces conducted a chemical weapons attack from a military base where Russian troops are reported to have a presence. Whether Moscow knew in advance is almost immaterial. The Kremlin and its Iranian allies have sustained Assad's conventional and unconventional killing machine for over six years now, and show no signs of focusing their attention on the Islamic State. President Trump should not be swayed by Russia's most recent efforts to set up "safe" or "de-escalation" zones whose primary purpose, rather than

protect innocent civilians, is to limit American military engagement, further entrench the Assad regime, and ensure Moscow ultimately controls Syria's fate.

In Ukraine, Russia has tested the new administration. A month after President Trump's inauguration, Moscow formally recognized passports issued by its secessionist puppet states in eastern Ukraine, and Russian economic links to the breakaway regions have multiplied since. Fighting flared after Trump's election and an American paramedic on an OSCE monitoring mission was recently killed in the conflict zone. The Kremlin also refuses to hand over control of Ukraine's external border to Kiev, despite its commitment to follow through on this under the Minsk ceasefire agreement.

Further west, Putin continues his efforts to delegitimize democratic ballots and generate moral equivalence between his repressive, kleptocratic system of governance in Russia and those that hold genuinely free and fair elections. Instead of proceeding more cautiously after the intervention in the 2016 U.S. election, Moscow has doubled down, deepening its attempt to subvert French elections. Russia's likely involvement in the massive cyberattack on the Emmanuel Macron campaign just days before the election showcases the Kremlin will deploy its cyberweapons and army of affiliated hackers to undermine electoral processes throughout Europe — destabilizing America's closest allies and weakening their ability to act together with the United States. And the Kremlin's next target is Germany.

Here in the United States, a meeting with Lavrov creates an unnecessary political distraction for Trump, particularly as it comes hours after the president fired FBI Director James Comey. As the White House continues to face heightened scrutiny over its alleged campaign ties to Moscow and the reported warnings that U.S. officials flagged about Gen. Mike Flynn, the meeting between Lavrov and Trump will only elevate congressional scrutiny of the administration's Russia policy, deepen bipartisan support for an independent prosecutor to take over the Russian investigation, and increase calls for additional sanctions against Russia. These realities reinforce that now was not the time to reward Moscow with a presidential meeting. Instead, the administration should do three things.

First, the administration needs to accelerate and conclude an interagency Russia policy review before a Trump-Putin summit is scheduled. This review would lay out a clear strategy toward Russia, coherently describing how the administration will define, defend, and advance American interests as well as the interests of U.S. allies and partners threatened by Russian actions. While it should certainly attempt to identify potential areas of cooperation with the Kremlin, the interagency review and its authors must take into account recent U.S. efforts to work with Moscow, including former President Barack Obama's failed "reset" policy. Putin has a clear track record. He pockets concessions, shuns positive reciprocity, and ultimately defines his personal interests in opposition to those of the United States.

This policy review should be clear-eyed. The United States has limited mechanisms to change Russian behavior. Trump must be sober to the reality that American and Russian interests — as twistedly defined by Putin — will continue to diverge more than they align. A U.S. policy that blends deterrence, vigilance, and limited engagement is the right cocktail for how to approach the Kremlin's current occupants. The Trump administration would be wise to avoid a transactional approach or any attempt at "grand bargains." With Putin's Russia, that story always ends in the same fashion.

Second, the administration must accept that Russian objectives for Syria do not and will not align with those of the United States. An expected impetus for the Trump-Putin summit this summer is to seek a ground-breaking U.S.-Russian approach to resolving the conflict in Syria. Russia expects this Summit and any subsequent announcements would further solidify its role as the dominant player in Syria's future and strengthen its position as an indispensable power broker in the Middle East. The flurry of Russian diplomacy ahead of Lavrov's visit showcases how Moscow is setting the contours of a presidential summit and shaping events on the ground to solely fit the Kremlin's interests. The United States should reject the allure of Russian-backed "safe zones" and instead expand efforts to destroy the Islamic State, testing Russia's intentions and leaving the door open to the possibility, however unlikely, that Putin opts to shift his focus away from protecting Assad's murderous regime.

Third, the Trump administration must elevate its engagement on Ukraine and press Russia to fulfill its ceasefire commitment as a precondition for any semblance of improved bilateral ties. Putin's decision to annex Crimea and foment a rebellion in eastern Ukraine undercuts core American interests. His actions have emboldened Beijing in the South China Sea, Tehran throughout the Middle East, and other hostile actors around the globe. President Trump needs to understand that Ukraine is not just about Ukraine. And if the United States naively yields to Putin's subjugation of Ukraine — likely in exchange for partial or inconsequential cooperation in Syria—the ripple effects will make the world of today seem tranquil in comparison to the world of tomorrow.

The United States and Russia must talk. They must negotiate. And they must take into account each other's policies on the global stage. But after multiple resets and countless initiatives by past American administrations to fundamentally transform relations with Moscow, President Trump should tread carefully. At the very least, what this means is that he should not have given Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov a personal meeting without a clear and achievable Russia strategy in place. That time may come, but now was not the time.