

U.S. | NEWS ANALYSIS

Trump Gets an Opening from Russia, but the Path Is Risky

By DAVID E. SANGER, ERIC SCHMITT and MICHAEL R. GORDON DEC. 30, 2016

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald J. Trump, who has pledged to reset relations with Russia, may have been tossed a lifeline by President Vladimir V. Putin on Friday. The Russian leader, skilled at keeping several steps ahead of his adversaries, announced that he would not retaliate against the Obama administration for imposing new sanctions and expelling Russian diplomats from the United States.

That clears the way for Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin to declare that they are starting anew — just what both men have publicly called for.

By Friday afternoon, Mr. Trump took to Twitter to embrace Mr. Putin.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

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Great move on delay (by V. Putin) - I always knew he was very smart!

2:41 PM - 30 Dec 2016

34,498 97,845

For effect, Mr. Trump “pinned” the post to the top of his Twitter feed, ensuring that it will remain the first message seen on his page. In a rapid demonstration of digital glasnost, within minutes the Russian Embassy in Washington had retweeted it.

“Putin is going out of his way to not take Obama seriously,” said Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, who spent decades in the C.I.A. tracking Russia while Mr. Putin was rising in the K.G.B. Instead, he said, “he is making a good-will gesture, presumably with the hope and expectation that Donald Trump will respond in kind.”

Now the question is whether the mutual admiration pact opens new chapters in a range of areas in which the longtime adversaries are at odds, including Syria, Ukraine, Crimea, the Middle East, the future of NATO and the development of nuclear weapons.

But moving too far, or too fast, in Moscow’s direction creates enormous risks for Mr. Trump. From Capitol Hill to Europe, people are already worried that Mr. Trump will simply do Mr. Putin’s bidding.

Certainly no one is more suspicious of Mr. Putin and his long-range intentions to undermine the West, and American leadership, than the Republican Party establishment. Senator John McCain of Arizona, one of the few left in the Senate who fought on the front lines of the Cold War, plans to hold the first hearing, on Thursday, on Russia’s effort to manipulate the election.

And, like the Obama White House, many of those Republicans see Mr. Putin’s gesture — including inviting the children of American diplomats to enjoy the Christmas trees at the Kremlin — as a ploy.

There is little chance the Republican inquiries can be derailed. So while Republicans in Congress are investigating, Mr. Trump plans to be investing in a new relationship.

In recent days, he has told associates he sees little upside to what he considers needless fights with Russia, and he has long said he sees potential in maintaining a working relationship with Mr. Putin. Mr. Trump has often said there are benefits to

cooperating with Russia in fighting the Islamic State in Syria, even though Russia has directed little of its firepower against the terrorist group.

Later on Friday, Mr. Trump praised Fox News, apparently for its coverage of Russia.



For his part, Mr. Putin is counting the days until Mr. Trump is in the Oval Office. Despite a failing economy, the Russian president has been pursuing for the past four years what most Western analysts see as a plan to reassert Russian power throughout the region. First came the annexation of Crimea and the shadow war in eastern Ukraine. Then came the deployment of nuclear-capable forces to the border of NATO countries, as Moscow, working to fracture the power structures in Germany and France and promote right-wing parties, sent a reinvigorated military force on patrol of the coasts of the Baltics and Western European nations.

Now the question is whether Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin can work a trade: a relaxation of tensions in return for an easing of the sanctions that have helped cripple the Russian economy since the United States and its allies imposed them.

Mr. Trump seemed open to backing away from those sanctions in an interview with The New York Times in March, when he questioned whether anyone, other than the Obama administration, saw much use in them. His nominee for secretary of state, Rex W. Tillerson, has also been critical, not surprising because they have put a huge crimp in Exxon Mobil's hopes for oil and gas exploration.

Syria could be the first area of cooperation. For months, Mr. Trump has talked about working hand in glove with Moscow against the Islamic State and other

jihadist groups. That seemed a fanciful notion while Russia was painting all of the Syrian opposition with the same brush and bombing the moderate Syrian opposition more than the Islamic State. But if a shaky cease-fire agreement announced on Thursday holds, it could focus Russian military action for the first time exclusively on the Islamic State and the Islamist group Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as the Nusra Front.

“The agreement potentially sets the table for Trump in Syria,” said Andrew J. Tabler, an expert on Syria at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Still, Mr. Tabler and other Syria specialists said the opportunity came with a number of important caveats. First, the cease-fire needs to hold so that a more enduring political solution to the Syria crisis can be pursued. That will require restraint on the part of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian opposition, the Iranians and the Russians.

Second, unless a political settlement is achieved that eventually eases Mr. Assad out of power, Syria may continue to be a magnet for extremists and insurgency, perpetuating the very problem that Mr. Putin and Mr. Trump say they are trying to solve.

While the Obama administration was not included in the cease-fire discussions, Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, extended a hand to Mr. Trump, who has never objected to Moscow’s growing influence in the Middle East.

“I would like to express my hope that after the administration of Donald Trump assumes its duties, it will also join the efforts in order to channel this work into one direction basing on friendly and collective cooperation,” Mr. Lavrov said during a meeting Thursday with Mr. Putin.

A Trump administration could become involved in future diplomatic talks, from which Secretary of State John Kerry was excluded in recent months. It could “coordinate” with the Russians militarily, something Mr. Obama’s defense secretary, Ashton B. Carter, has resisted.

Syria is just the beginning. The fragile Baltic members of NATO — Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania — are looking at large military buildups meant to intimidate them. The Ukrainians have seen their lights turn off mysteriously and tracked it to Russian hackers. The British and French report that Russian practice bomber runs and submarine missions just off their shores, something they have not seen since Soviet days.

The French and the Germans say they already see signs of hacking and “influence operations” in their own elections, scheduled for next year. Each has political movements with echoes of the one that brought Mr. Trump to power and that could eat away at the European Union and the NATO alliance.

The most difficult problem may be what to do about the oldest form of post-World War II competition: nuclear weapons.

Emerging from his briefings, Mr. Trump has expressed surprise in recent weeks about the size and abilities of Russia’s arsenal and has largely blamed New START, the arms control treaty that Mr. Obama negotiated.

Though modest, the treaty reduced deployed nuclear arsenals to 1,550 weapons on each side, down from tens of thousands at the height of the Cold War. But Mr. Trump declared last week that he was perfectly happy to renew the arms race if need be, a declaration that was jarringly out of tune with his calls for a friendlier relationship with Russia.

It is not clear if Mr. Trump has been briefed on the “nuclear modernization” program on which the Obama administration and Congress have spent billions, or seen the Pentagon’s proposals for the \$1 trillion revamp of the delivery systems — submarines, missiles and bombers — to make them stealthier and more survivable. If he signs on, that race could become serious, and seriously expensive.

Correction: December 31, 2016

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated the month that Donald J. Trump seemed to back away from sanctions in an interview with The New York Times. The interview was in March, not November.

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A version of this news analysis appears in print on December 31, 2016, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: From Russia, an Opening.

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