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Russia Sought A Broad Reset With Trump, Secret Document Shows

A Russian proposal obtained by BuzzFeed News reveals Moscow's ambitious plan to break with the past and launch a major rapprochement with the United States.

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WASHINGTON — In the third month of Donald Trump’s presidency, Vladimir Putin dispatched one of his diplomats to the State Department to deliver a bold proposition: the full normalization of relations between the United States and Russia across all major branches of government.

The proposal, spelled out in a detailed document obtained by BuzzFeed News, called for the wholesale restoration of diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels severed between the two countries after Russia’s military interventions in Ukraine and Syria.

The broad scope of the Kremlin’s reset plan came with an ambitious launch date: immediately.

By April, a top Russian cyber official, Andrey Krutskikh, would meet with his American counterpart for consultations on “information security,” the document proposed. By May, the two countries would hold “special consultations” on the war in Afghanistan, the Iran nuclear deal, the “situation in Ukraine,” and efforts to denuclearize the “Korean Peninsula.” And by the time Putin and Trump held their first meeting, the heads of the CIA, FBI, National Security Council, and Pentagon would meet face-to-face with their Russian counterparts to discuss areas of mutual interest. A raft of other military and diplomatic channels opened during the Obama administration’s first-term “reset” would also be restored.

“This document represents nothing less than a road map for full-scale normalization of US-Russian relations,” said Andrew Weiss, the vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, after reviewing the proposal provided by BuzzFeed News.

Besides offering a snapshot of where the Kremlin wanted to move the bilateral relationship, the

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US anger over Moscow’s alleged interference in the 2016 election and might accept a beginning of rapprochement.

“It just ignores everything that caused the relationship to deteriorate and pretends that the election interference and the Ukraine crisis never happened,” said Angela Stent, a former national intelligence officer on Russia during the George W. Bush administration who also reviewed the document.

As of today, only a small fraction of the dozens of proposed meetings have taken place — and many of the formalized talks appear unlikely to happen as Moscow and Washington expel one another’s diplomats and close diplomatic facilities in a tit-for-tat downward spiral.

The Russian Embassy in Washington declined to discuss the document. “We do not comment on closed bilateral negotiations which is normal diplomatic practice,” the embassy said in a statement.

Officials at the White House and State Department declined to say who delivered the document but did not dispute its authenticity. They denied giving the Russians explicit indications that their proposal was feasible. When asked how Moscow got the impression that its terms might be acceptable, a spokesperson for the National Security Council cited misleading news reports about Trump's infatuation with Russia. "Frankly, I would point more to media coverage than administration overtures," the spokesperson said.

Of course, Russian officials could simply have listened to Trump's extensive public remarks, which repeatedly touted the benefits of engagement with Moscow as recently as February. "I would love to be able to get along with Russia," Trump said at a news conference.

Yet despite Trump's warm rhetoric, the actual level of engagement between the United States and Russia since the president took office has been fairly limited outside of the open channels used by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, and the White House.

Under Secretary of State Tom Shannon and his Russian counterpart Sergei Ryabkov have held on-and-off discussions on irritants in the US-Russia relationship, but have little to show for it. On Syria, State Department diplomats Michael Ratney and Brett McGurk have held regular discussions with Russian counterparts to discuss a modest ceasefire confined to the southwest of the country. On Ukraine, Special Envoy Kurt Volker's discussions with his Russian counterpart have only just gotten off the ground.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, has been openly skeptical of engagement with the Russians as it maintains a limited deconfliction channel in Syria. In February, Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met his Russian counterpart, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, in Azerbaijan, but was quick to point out that the meeting did not portend increased cooperation with Russia in Syria or anywhere else. The two met again in Turkey in May.

Defense Secretary James Mattis has also downplayed expectations for cooperation, telling reporters in February, "We are not in a position right now to collaborate on a military level."

CIA Director Mike Pompeo traveled to Moscow in May for talks with Russian intelligence officials, but an agency spokesman declined to discuss the nature of the meeting.

In pushing its reset plan, Moscow seemed to underestimate the political blowback the Trump administration would face if it carried out a large-scale rapprochement amid high-profile investigations by the FBI and Congress into allegations of collusion with Russia.

"Putin doesn't seem to understand that Trump's powers are not the same as his," said Steven Pifer, a Russia expert at the Brookings Institution. "The checks and balances, the special prosecutor and congressional investigations have tied Trump's hands in ways that didn't occur to Putin."

When asked if he is disappointed in Trump, given early hopes of improved relations, Putin has responded frostily.

“Your question sounds very naive,” Putin told a reporter at a press conference in China last week. “He is not my bride, and I am not his groom.”

“Each country has its own interests,” he added.

Still, the decision by the US Congress to slap new sanctions on Russia in August, which prompted Moscow to force the firing or transfer of hundreds of US employees in Russia, which in turn prompted the US to shutter Russia’s consulate in San Francisco, is not what Russia’s parliament presumably hoped for when it burst into applause the night of Trump’s surprise election victory over Hillary Clinton.

“When the Russians submitted this proposal, they were under the impression that Trump would do what he said he would do: make a deal with Putin and normalize relations,” said Stent, who is also director of Eurasian studies at Georgetown University.

“That’s a reflection of the way their own system works,” she said. “If Putin wants something done, the Duma is compliant, the Ministry of Defense is compliant. But in the US, a lot of these things aren’t in the purview of the White House even if you have a president who is inclined.”

A senior State Department official acknowledged that Moscow’s initial expectations were unrealistic. In a July meeting between Tillerson and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Hamburg, Tillerson stressed that a broader rapprochement wasn’t possible absent positive Russian action on Ukraine, the official said.

Moscow’s eagerness to dictate new bilateral meetings has at times irritated State Department officials, two US officials said. At a summit in Manila in August, for example, Lavrov left a bilateral meeting with Tillerson and began telling reporters that America’s special envoy for Ukraine would soon travel to Moscow to discuss the Ukraine crisis. US officials, however, had not agreed to hold the meeting in Russia and later demanded it happen elsewhere. The Americans ultimately prevailed, and the meeting took place in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

Despite recent disappointments, the Kremlin hasn’t given up hope for normalized ties with the United States, even if it is still threatening to expel more diplomats and sue Washington over the closure of its US facilities. In an interview two weeks ago, Moscow’s new ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Antonov, made a passing reference to the March proposal and suggested the offer was still on the table. “We have always been interested in constructive interaction with Washington on the entire bilateral and international agenda,” Antonov told a Russian news outlet.

But as the White House faces the glare of multiple Russia probes, it has done little to pressure the

risk-averse national security bureaucracy is unlikely to move forward on its own, especially given the nomination of prominent Russia hawks in senior positions, such as a Kremlin skeptic Wess Mitchell who is slated to become the top US diplomat to Europe and Russia.

“There may not be a willingness by the US to go back to business as usual given that Russia policy on Ukraine and Syria hasn’t changed,” said Pifer.

In an apparent reference to Tillerson’s hawkish advisers, Putin told a business forum last week that the former Exxon Mobil CEO has “fallen in with bad company.”

The State Department says it remains open to better ties. “We’ve told the Russians that the path to normalization runs through Ukraine,” a State Department official said.

As written, Russia’s offer from March contains numerous meetings with proposed deadlines that came and went. Perhaps the most forlorn proposal was one calling on both governments to work toward “resuming and promoting mutually beneficial trade and investment cooperation.” Five months after the proposal was delivered, Congress overwhelmingly passed legislation that slapped new economic sanctions on Russia while barring Trump from terminating previous sanctions without a congressional review.

Another ambitious proposal called for relaunching a pair of bilateral working groups on cybersecurity and counterterrorism originally started in 2009 as a part of Barack Obama’s sweeping “reset” with Russia. In July, that proposal looked as if it might succeed when Trump tweeted that he had discussed “forming an impenetrable Cyber Security unit” with Putin. But after a widespread backlash from Republicans, the president quickly reversed himself. “The fact that President Putin and I discussed a Cyber Security unit doesn't mean I think it can happen. It can't,” he later tweeted.

The initial cybersecurity group launched under Obama was plagued by infighting as the Russian side tried to assert the right of governments to control information, which the American side rejected. “It never went anywhere,” a former official who participated on the US side said. “And with the Russian use of cyber as an instrument in Ukraine and then against us in 2016, the challenge became even greater.”

But even a bilateral channel mired in gridlock can offer Moscow something appealing: the optics of being seen as a global power going toe-to-toe with the Americans. ●

Vera Bergengruen contributed to this report.

CORRECTION

The name of Russia's new ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, was misspelled in an earlier version of this post.

Other perspectives on this story

- 1 Russia's plan follows the path of traditional bargaining theory, one person said. >

- 2 Another tied the agreement to Trump's alleged economic interests in Russia. >

- 3 A few people called for the normalization of a relationship between the US and Russia. >

- 4 Trump has a reputation for not following through on his end of a deal, one person said. >

- 5 Some people saw Trump's idea of a joint cybersecurity task force with Russia as part of the plan. >

- 6 Others saw the plan as further motivation for Russia to have supported Trump in the 2016 election. >

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