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Prospects for Russia-US Relations: Serious Assessment Requires Realistic Approach

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There is a very strong belief that Donald Trump will improve the US relations with Russia. Some people are overoptimistic, they have no doubt the president will succeed. Indeed, Mr. Trump has proven to be a very independently minded and shrewd person capable of deep, insightful thinking. It's a feather in his hat. But it's not all rosy.

Politics is the art of the possible. To achieve the desired «possible», one needs to adopt a realistic and cool-headed approach. There are factors that are often omitted or not given serious consideration when it comes to the assessment of the prospects for progress in the Russia-US relations.

Russia and the US don't see eye-to-eye on the main trends of global development. They have different ideas on the future world order. It is unlikely that they will bring the views closer anytime soon.

In his Q & A marathon on December 23, Russian President Vladimir Putin played down the prospect of a rapid improvement of relations under Donald Trump, saying only that «things cannot get worse» in the relationship.

By and large, Donald Trump will stick to the promises he made during the presidential race. Whatever happens abroad, he'll focus on economy and illegal migration, not foreign policy, to ensure he won't be a one-term president.

The Republican Party has a majority in both houses of Congress, governorships and state legislatures and, probably, the Supreme Court. The new president is to choose a jurist next year to fill the seat of the late Justice Antonin Scalia. Mr. Trump's electoral victory frustrates the hopes of liberals, who lost their best opportunity in more than 40 years to gain a majority in the high court. Many people believe the Republican majority strengthens the president's hand but there is a reverse side of the medal – he'll have no one to blame for possible failures.

There is a strong anti-Russia consensus among Democrats and the GOP. Take Trump's statements about Crimea and hopes for good personal relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin - nobody supported the President-elect, including Vice-President-elect Mike Pence. No US president is powerful enough to improve the relationship without the support of his own team and party.

It's important to note that there is nothing like a draft roadmap or clear vision how to start the improvement.

The foreign policy team includes people with different views. Some support the president regarding his stance on Russia. Michael Flynn and Rex Tillerson are the most well-known among them. Adviser Carter Page has already launched contacts with Moscow.

Mainstream media describe Richard Burt, the chairman of the advisory council of *The National Interest*, as a man who has ties to Russia. Indeed, he is well remembered and respected in that country as chief negotiator for the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). Burt has applied significant efforts to support the GOP candidate, especially in the first major foreign-policy address to set the stage for cooperation with Moscow.

But the position of Gen. James Mattis, who is nominated for Defense Secretary, regarding Russia has not been made public. Gen. Joseph Dunford will remain the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff for half a year after Trump's inauguration. With Mr. Mattis as Defense Chief, there is a great possibility he'll get a second term. Mr. Dunford believes that Russia is the top threat to US national security.

There are other members of the team whose stance is not clearly defined. It's impossible to talk about unity.

There is another fact that is worth mentioning. Since the US withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty in 2002, the ballistic missile defense (BMD) has always been a divisive issue to hinder arms control efforts and prompt Russia to take retaliatory steps. The Republican election platform includes a multi-layered BMD. Not just a couple of sites located in Europe but a real global «Star Wars» system with its elements based in space. Nobody in the Republican camp, including the president-elect, has said this provision should be reviewed.

The GOP is a party of peace through strength. The Republican platform, a document often forgotten as optimistic forecasts for the future of bilateral relationship are made, includes other provisions to boost the military potential and ensure the global dominance.

And now the main thing - the platform says «We should abandon arms control treaties that benefit our adversaries without improving our national security». The New START is criticized as unverifiable and running against US national interests. The platform calls for freezing allocations for the New START and puts into doubt the validity of INF Treaty.

Remember how much damage the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty has done? Mr. Trump has a duty to comply. Russia has each and every reason to believe that the US led by Republicans is an unreliable partner.

The platform is a document the people and electors voted for. It cannot be just swept under the rug after the election is over and Russia should take into account what it says while dealing with the new administration.

There is something else the Republican platform underscores – exceptionalism. The US will never reject the idea of global dominance. It's deeply rooted in the American mindset. Mr. Trump says he wants the US to be internationally respected and slammed President Obama for weakness. It's not respect what is meant but rather the ability to influence other countries. True, the military activities abroad could be curtailed but the global ambitions will remain.

The new administration's stance on Ukraine and Georgia is murky at least. With Mr. Trump in office, the two countries have a slim chance of joining NATO - the bloc the president-elect has criticized so strongly. But will the new administration press Kiev to comply with the Minsk accords? Another interesting question rarely asked - will the US join and convert the «Normandy Four» «into the Normandy Five»? It would be a logical step to take.

The sanctions and the status of Crimea may continue to be divisive issues but the differences will not hinder progress in other areas. After all, the US never recognized the Baltic States as part of the Soviet Union, but it did not prevent either the alliance during WWII, or détente, or strategic arms reductions.

Both parties will find it extremely difficult to restore trust in bilateral relations. Trust appears to be eroded, and it will take a long time, great effort and considerable political will on both sides to

restore it. Freezing of diplomatic contacts is a serious factor to aggravate the situation. Actually, the regular contacts between the foreign policy chiefs on Syria are the only connecting link.

No high-level meetings or summits, except the Lavrov-Kerry track, are taking place. Informal diplomacy (Track II) is almost non-existent. Perhaps, the time is right to intensify the efforts of retired senior ministers, high officials and military leaders from Russia and the United States. Unofficial contacts and exchange of ideas might serve the purpose of relaunching a comprehensive dialogue. The damage control channels of the bilateral dialogue should be restored, and positive aspects of bilateral relations should be protected.

The future of arms control is the biggest challenge the countries face. They had arms control agreements in place in the heat of the Cold War. If nothing replaces the New START, and the INF Treaty becomes a victim of mutual accusations of non-compliance, there will be a new situation when the arms race will be unfettered for the first time since SALT-I was signed in 1972. And that's the main thing the two parties have to avoid at all costs, no matter what bones of contention they might have.

Personal chemistry is not a decisive factor but it's important enough. If the Russian and US leaders hit it off, it could provide a strong impulse to normalize the relations. After all, the two have a common enemy – the Islamic State (IS). The two countries have not fought a common enemy since Hitler.

A good thing about it is that, unlike in the days of Gold War, the two powers are not divided ideologically. They don't belong to two confronting systems; there is no standoff between socialist and capitalist worlds.

Mr. Trump definitely has his own ideas on the prospects of the bilateral relationship. But the opportunities are limited. Anyway, forming a new presidential team will take time. It's hardly realistic to expect any initiatives from the administration before the second half of 2017. An attempt to shift Russia policy will face strong opposition in Congress, the US media and officials in place. Donald Trump will have to convince lawmakers and people. He'll need public support on his side.

Politics is the art of the possible. Talking to each other and continuing arms control efforts is a possibility. That's where the parties should start from. Neither Moscow nor Washington has an interest in further deterioration of the relationship or the collapse of the current international system. It's not all doom and gloom, but one should be realistic. There is no bed of roses ahead. A host of factors negatively affects the process. No progress can be achieved in one fell swoop.