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By Daniel R. DePetris

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*With Mueller Done,*

*Now is the Time for Better Relations With Russia*

*The shrieking pundits have been quieted. Trump should seize the opportunity and work for peace.*



President Trump and first lady Melania Trump with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on July 16. (www.kremlin.ru)

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation is over, and the results could not be more of a relief for President Donald Trump: no collusion with the Russian government and not enough evidence for an obstruction of justice charge. It was unquestionably good news for the president and for Republicans on Capitol Hill who have lashed their own political futures to Trump.

The report is also a plus for the country—not only because Washington won't be consumed with a constitutional crisis anytime soon, but also because it provides the

Trump administration with its first opportunity to settle on a Russia policy without the risk of an extreme political backlash.

U.S.-Russia relations were already in the tank before Trump was sworn into office. Russian President Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin after a four-year hiatus as prime minister was like a wet blanket over the fire of an otherwise productive detente between the two former Cold War adversaries. Putin took what had been a relatively productive period with the Americans (deals had been struck on a variety of issues, including New START, the use of Russian air routes into Afghanistan, counterterrorism cooperation, ever-stronger U.N. Security Council sanctions on Iran) into a deep freeze in less than a year. Russia's annexation of Crimea, military support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine, campaign on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria, and interference in European politics all contributed to the unhealthy discourse. Putin's active measures operation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election reaffirmed what so many officials in Washington already believed: Putin is out to attack American democracy and challenge the U.S. in multiple theaters.

Trump's desire to get along with Putin was not a bad idea at its core. Russia may be a weakling compared to its Soviet ancestor ([its GDP](#) is about \$400 billion less than recession-threatened [Italy](#)), but it remains a major power in Eurasia. Moscow has demonstrated on three separate occasions over the last decade—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015—that it's willing to use military force when its interests are threatened. Of course, Russia is also the world's largest nuclear power, with thousands of nuclear warheads in its arsenal. Nobody, not even John Bolton, would suggest that getting into a military confrontation with Russia is smart.

Yet for as long as the Mueller investigation has hovered over the White House, Trump has been unable to chart a course towards a more constructive relationship with Moscow. With collusion never far from anybody's lips and Washington enveloped in ever more hysterical anti-Russia sentiment, getting close to Moscow in any way was risky politics. Senator Rand Paul found this out the hard way when his attempt to lift travel restrictions on Russian lawmakers for the most innocent of reasons—to encourage a dialogue between Russian MPs and members of Congress—was [immediately dismissed](#). It was much more politically expedient to keep the sanctions bills coming; whether they consisted of mandatory [reporting on the assets of Russian oligarchs](#) or a prohibition on buying Russian debt were not as important as [continuing the deluge](#). Why would any politician try to find friendly avenues with Moscow when the politics stank?

During the Mueller investigation, Trump couldn't take a meeting with a senior Russian official without hearing every pundit on TV speculate feverishly about the sinister nature of it all. The president, true to form, only fueled the collusion conspiracy through his own actions. Whether it was calling Jim Comey a "[nutjob](#)" to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov or the public taking Putin's side over the U.S. intelligence community on the issue of election interference, he only complicated his own path towards better engagement with Russia.

No politician wanted to be framed as empathetic to Putin's evil genius or attacked as a naïf who didn't understand what Moscow was doing. The politics of Russia were too hot for most people to touch—especially the president, who was under the watchful eye of the most famous lawyer in the country.

The fight over the Mueller report will go on, this time over how much to disclose to the public and whether Attorney General William Barr made the correct decision in not filing an obstruction charge.

But with the investigation complete, the report submitted, and the conclusions made, the Trump administration may now have a chance to at least explore whether the Russians are open to collaboration on fair terms.

Politics in Washington can often guide policy. The question post-Mueller is whether policy will now be front of mind.

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