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David, M.E.L.

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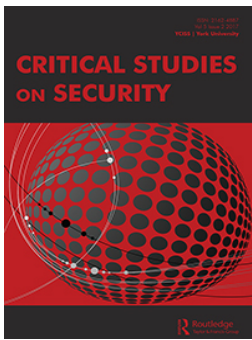
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ECLIPSED BY RUSSIA: TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

Maxine David

Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Barely a day passed in Donald Trump's first 100 days without Russia dominating the headlines. While campaigning, Trump expressed admiration for President Putin, promising he would succeed in befriending the Kremlin where Barack Obama had failed. This promise now looks set to define Trump's presidency. The extensive network linking his associates and administration to Russia has created a different kind of swamp than the one he pledged to cleaning up in Washington. This intervention considers what this means for Trump's foreign and security policy and for those external actors for which Russia is a key actor. For Syria and Ukraine respectively, there is little hope the United States is able and willing to play a pivotal role in ending their conflicts. Trump's campaign rhetoric gave European allies reason to doubt Obama's commitment to defend them against a possible Russian threat would be matched by Trump; the first 100 days gave no cause to rethink that. While many 'America First' promises are being kept, any predictability is heavily undermined by a sense Trump does not understand what the USA's interests are, nor how foreign relations can rebound on those at home. The Russia controversy has damaged the US reputation, weakening it on the world stage, a worrying development for those who have so far cleaved to the US-led liberal world order. In reflecting on Trump's first 100 days and Russia, it is worth scrutinising his key foreign and security appointments and effects on the US reputation.

Two key appointments did nothing to allay fears about the Trump administration's relationship with the Kremlin. Indeed, whether disregarding or not understanding how perceptions matter, Trump's appointment of Rex Tillerson, former Chief Executive of Exxon-Mobil, to the position of Secretary of State and Michael Flynn as National Security Advisor seemed calculated to increase not dim speculation. Even the appointment of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General (controversial for other reasons) would not prove immune from the Russia effect as it emerged he had failed to disclose during his confirmation hearing his two prior conversations with the Russian Ambassador to Washington. The controversy was further fuelled by the exposure of a long trail linking Trump, his family, advisors and associates to Russia. From those such as Paul Manafort, Trump's one time campaign manager connected to Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs and Ukraine's ousted former President, Yanukovich, to Felix Sater, a business associate with alleged ties to the Russian mafia, the connections are extensive.¹ Consequently, all Trump's efforts to dismiss accusations of colluding with the enemy have failed. On 30 March 2017, the Senate Intelligence Committee commenced what its Chairman called a 'rare activity', an open hearing into the part played by Russian 'active measures past and present', as well as a review of Russian actions in the 2016 election campaign (Reuters 2017).

Both at home and abroad, this is significant. Domestically, Trump's Russia connections have distracted and diverted resources from the business of government to one of investigation. Reportedly, eight organs of government are involved in scrutiny of the President and his associates (Campbell 2017). The House and Senate Intelligence Committees are leading investigations into the links between Trump's White House and Russia, as is the FBI. Those investigations are themselves not uncontroversial because of accusations of partisanship on the part of key players, including Attorney General Sessions and the one-time Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes. The investigations are not simply about who had conversations with whom and when, they include investigations into Manafort's financial activities (Schmidt et al. 2017), as well as whether Flynn received illegal payments from Russia (Wright 2017). Between that and the compromised election itself, US democracy is not looking healthy; witness the hacking of Democrats' emails, the FBI's unfortunate timing in announcing a further investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails and, to outsiders, the peculiarity of a candidate winning the majority of the popular vote losing the presidency itself.

The health of US democracy matters for foreign policy because it speaks directly to whether the United States can exert soft power abroad. Undermining US hegemony has long been one of Putin's goals; failings in US democracy and Trump's own failure to protect the US reputation play into Putin's hand. The dense links between Trump's circle and Russia contrasts starkly with the wider Washington perspective which views Russia through the lens of a threat, even enemy, to the American way of life and the liberal world order. Take, for example, the transcript of the confirmation hearing for General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense. Under questioning about his perception of international relations today, Mattis responded the world order was 'under the biggest attack since World War II', from Russia, terrorists and China (Senate Committee on Armed Services 2017, 41). In that hearing, chaired, it should be acknowledged by John McCain (whose anti-Russian credentials are well-established) Russia was mentioned 45 times, Putin 15. This compared to ISIS/ISIL with 17 references, terrorism 9, China 21 and Xi Jinping none. Under his own confirmation questioning, Tillerson spoke of the need to be 'clear eyed about our relationship with Russia', referring to its invasion of Ukraine, its support of 'Syrian forces that brutally violates the laws of war' and the fears of NATO allies (Senate Foreign Relations Committee 2017, 21). His responses then, especially about sanctions against Russia, contrasted with what he had said as a businessman, such that Tillerson the diplomat has so far given less cause for concern than Trump, whose own perception of Russia does not accord with the dominant view on Capitol Hill.

Just one moment cast doubt on Trump's pro-Russian inclinations: his authorisation to launch Tomahawk missiles against a military airbase in Homs province, Syria, on 7 April 2017. The strike signalled that Trump's administration was not Obama's and that the White House would not let Russia (and Iran) continue to have things entirely their way. The use of no fewer than 59 missiles was also consistent with Trump's America First Foreign Policy that 'our military dominance must be unquestioned' (White House, The 2017). Making clear this was a response to reports of Assad's regime using chemical weapons, and forewarning Russia, which itself had military personnel and aircraft at this base, was sensible in avoiding a further escalation of US–Russia tensions. It drew only predictable Russian responses that this served to cause a further deterioration in relations (President of Russia 2017) and the temporary suspension of the Memorandum of Understanding on Prevention of Flight Safety Incidents, an information sharing agreement, reportedly restored later (Mills 2017). Overall, the strike

was received well in Washington and beyond, with many hoping the administration would now commit sufficient time and attention to work with others to end the conflict (Palazzo and Foster 2017). That cautious optimism has so far not been rewarded. While the strike was sensibly not followed by any move that could be interpreted as a desire for regime change in Syria, something to which Russia would have objected (and perhaps acted) more strenuously, neither was it accompanied by action targeted at human rights protection; fresh activity to revive the Humanitarian Access Task Force, for example, or renewed vigour in US activity in the UN. It was difficult to escape the impression this was deliberately staged to undermine those arguing at home that Trump was in Putin's pocket. That some distraction would be desirable is hardly arguable, as events around Flynn testify.

Famously now, Michael Flynn lasted a mere 23 days before being forced out of office under weight of evidence he had discussed the possible lifting of sanctions against Russia with the Russian Ambassador to Washington during the campaign period and then lied to Vice-President Pence about that. This might not have touched Trump himself had it not quickly emerged that even before Flynn took office, Trump and his advisors had been advised by the former acting US Attorney General Sally Yates that Flynn was being investigated. On Trump's 99th day in office, his former National Security Advisor was issued with a subpoena to release to the Senate Intelligence Committee documents relating to his communications with Russia.

Perceptions matter in foreign policy (Wang 2006), especially for the world hegemon, whose reputation and image are important. Flynn and Tillerson were not the sole or, especially in the case of Tillerson, the most obvious choices for appointment to their offices. What conclusions can be drawn from Trump's insistence on doing so? There are various possibilities – inexperience, naivety, arrogance, disregard for opinion, self-interest; none speaks well in foreign and security policy terms. Their links to Russia may not have figured as positive considerations for Trump in appointing them but, clearly, neither were they hindrances. When speaking of reputation, one might imagine a braid in which the other strands are legitimacy, trust and power. Remove reputation and the others unravel too. At a time when the liberal ideas and norms so long the backbone of international relations are threatened by those of non-western, often illiberal actors, what Trump is doing to the US reputation matters.

Trust is an essential component for durable alliance. Trump's failure to distance himself from Russia or to show support for Ukraine's integrity will continue to test the USA's relationship with other NATO states far beyond 100 days. The strike against Syria did nothing to reassure key allies nor to divert Russia from its path there – or elsewhere. Events since April 29 force one to conclude that Trump's administration will look back to those first 100 days as halcyon compared to what will follow.

Note

1. See Crowley (2017) for a visual representation of the connections, both proven and unproven.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Maxine David is Lecturer at Leiden University. She is a Foreign Policy analyst, specialising in Russia's foreign policy relations with the EU and USA. She is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Contemporary European Research*.

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