



**Ambassador P. S Raghavan**  
Convenor, National Security Advisory Board  
Former Indian Ambassador to Russia (2014-16)

## Overview

- Cordial Trump-Putin calls, but sharper US-Russia exchanges at other levels.
- Deteriorating Eastern Ukraine situation may increase Russia-Europe tension.
- Geneva and Astana processes: Syrian reconciliation remains elusive.
- RIC meeting & India-Russia political, defence and strategic consultations.

---

## Russia & USA

At his traditional year-end news conference on December 14, President Putin was asked by an American journalist to assess President Trump's first year in office. Prefacing his answer with the remark that this was for the American electorate to judge, President Putin responded that he saw some "major achievements", like buoyancy in the markets, reflecting investors' trust in the US economy. President Trump called President Putin later the same day. The White House said he thanked President Putin for acknowledging America's strong economic performance, and that the two presidents also discussed working together to resolve "the very dangerous situation in North Korea". President Trump told news reporters later that the Russian President had said "very nice things" about what he (Trump) has done for America.

A couple of days later (December 17), the Russian president placed a call to the White House. The Kremlin release said he thanked President Trump for information passed on by the US Central Intelligence Agency, which helped to nab terrorists, who had planned attacks in St Petersburg. While conveying his appreciation, President Putin is reported to have assured President Trump that Russian agencies would similarly pass on to their American counterparts any such information of relevance to them.

These velvet gloves were not in evidence in other interactions between the two countries. The US National Security Strategy, released on December 18, identified Russia as a principal strategic rival to the US. Clubbing "revisionist powers" Russia and China with "rogue states" and terrorist groups, the NSS describes US's competition with them as "fundamentally political contests between those who favour repressive systems and those who favour free societies". The NSS says Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide it from its allies. It adds that Russia's new military capabilities, including nuclear systems, remain "the most significant existential threat to the United States", and, "the combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing".

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response was that the NSS reveals the ambition to preserve US dominance and that the US does not want countries like Russia and China to become major powers. Russia, says the MFA statement, is accused of threatening the world order, which "apparently means the unipolar world, structured around the interests and needs of the United States". President Putin also weighed in on the NSS, saying it is "an offensive strategy, in diplomatic language" and "aggressive, in military language".

Both the NSS and the Russian response did, however, confirm readiness to cooperate with each other on areas of mutual interest.

The other strong disagreement was on the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, one of the most significant Cold War arms control treaties, which completed 30 years in December. The US Commerce Department announced sanctions against two Russian companies for developing a missile contravening the limitations of the INF Treaty. It is an accusation that has been around for a few years, and the Russians have strenuously argued that the deployment of the missile is in conformity with the treaty. In their turn, the Russians accuse the Americans of violating the treaty themselves and of pointing fingers at the Russians in order to build excuses for withdrawal from it.

President Putin raised this issue in an address to senior Russian defence officials, saying that the missile systems being deployed in Romania and Poland can be used to launch medium-range cruise missiles, and that target missiles used by the United States for testing anti-ballistic missile systems indicate that technologies outlawed by the treaty are already being developed there. He said Russia will respond appropriately and rapidly to these threats.

Separately, the US imposed sanctions on a number of Russian citizens in accordance with the Magnitsky Act, under which the US Government can sanction foreign government officials implicated in human rights abuses anywhere in the world. The sanctions mean a ban on entry into the US. Among the Russians included in the sanctions was the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov. While few in Russia or abroad consider Chechnya under Kadyrov a shining example of human rights protection, the timing of this US decision is intriguing

---

## Europe and the Ukraine crisis

In his interactions at meetings of NATO Foreign Ministers, Secretary of State Tillerson continued with harsh criticism of Russia (see Review, November 2017), identifying its actions in Ukraine as the single greatest threat to European security. He said deployment of a peacekeeping force was imperative for ensuring an end to violence, adding that there were still "some gaps" in Russian and Western views on the scope of activities of the peacekeeping force. President Putin's remarks at his press conference on December 14 hinted that the gaps may be pretty wide: he said that what the West really wanted was for the peacekeeping force to be an independent international force in the Donbass – a proposition that the Donbass rebels are not likely to accept, since it would negate their territorial gains over the past three years.

By the end of the month, however, it appeared that the US had moved to a different track. Official sources confirmed that the US had begun to supply sniper rifles and other small arms to the Ukrainian army and other fighters; it was also indicated that more lethal weaponry, like the Javelin anti-tank missiles was also on the way. The Obama Administration had long rebuffed Ukrainian requests for such weaponry, on the argument (supported by, besides the Russians, the Minsk agreement co-guarantors, France and Germany) that it would exacerbate the conflict. Recent words and actions indicate that the Trump Administration is quite willing to countenance such an exacerbation.

Meanwhile, there were reports of increasing Ukrainian troop movements on the Donbass front. Russia complained that the Ukrainian authorities were placing obstacles to the movement of Russian monitors in the OSCE group. Eventually, Russia announced that it was withdrawing its officers from the monitoring group, since their normal functioning had become impossible.

It is now quite clear that the US has totally marginalized the role of France and Germany in the Ukraine

crisis. It also seems that the Minsk agreements, which have been the basis of negotiations hitherto, are dead, though all parties continue to pay lip-service to them. For France, Germany and some other EU countries, the Minsk agreements were the best hope of getting beyond the Ukraine crisis and resuming more normal relations with Russia, since their business communities were losing considerable business through the sanctions. The US, with fewer economic stakes in Russia, was less concerned about reaching an early resolution; on the contrary, as the Dutch scholar, Chris Kaspar de Ploeg notes in his meticulously researched recent book, *Ukraine in the Crossfire*, the US encouraged Ukraine's lack of commitment to the Minsk accords. With the strong US support now signalled by the supply of lethal weapons, there is absolutely no incentive for Ukraine to make the politically difficult concessions of granting special status to the Donbass region and giving it greater autonomy (which is part of the Minsk agreements).

The deteriorating security situation in Ukraine made it easier for the European Union to achieve unity in the decision to extend sanctions against Russia for another six months from January 31 2018 to 31 July 2018.

A resolution sponsored by Ukraine in the UN General Assembly, condemning human rights violations in Crimea, was passed, but with less support than Ukraine and the West might have wished for. The resolution received 70 votes for, 26 against and 77 abstentions. For comparison, the UNGA resolution in March 2014, criticizing the Russian annexation of Crimea, got 100 votes for, 11 against and 58 abstentions. As expected, the 2017 resolution received the overwhelming support of European countries, though Serbia voted against it and Bosnia abstained. However, across Southeast Asia, West Asia, Africa and America (other than USA and Canada), there was a significant move away from support. Of the BRICS countries, India, China and South Africa moved from abstention in 2014 to opposing the Crimea resolution. All 10 Southeast Asian countries opposed or abstained; 5 of them had supported the resolution of 2014. In West Asia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and Tunisia moved from support to abstention. In Africa, Angola, Mauritius, Nigeria, Uganda and a number of others moved in a similar direction.

---

## Syrian Political Process

Though Russia and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura declared Syria to be virtually liberated from ISIS, and President Putin announced a partial withdrawal of Russian forces from the country, an intense jockeying for positional advantage continued between various groups, supported by their regional patrons.

The Geneva round of intra-Syrian dialogue, continuing from November, eventually wound up on December 15 with no progress. Ambassador de Mistura blamed mainly the Syrian government delegation for the failure, since it had insisted that the opposition withdraw a statement that President Assad could have no role in a political transition process. Russia continued to engage Ambassador de Mistura, who visited Moscow and had detailed briefings from the Russian Foreign and Defence Ministers. He also participated in the Russia-Turkey-Iran "Astana process" meeting on December 22, where the countries announced that the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue (proposed by Russia, but so far receiving wide enough acceptance among Syrian opposition groups) would be held in Sochi on January 29-30. Russia was careful to repeatedly clarify that both the Astana process and the proposed Sochi congress are intended to give momentum to, and not supplant, the UN process. Ambassador de Mistura has announced a meeting in Geneva in January, and the organizers of the Sochi congress plan a "special preparatory meeting" in Sochi on 19-20 January.

It is not as yet clear how these processes will progress. Russia's diplomacy with Saudi Arabia and Egypt succeeded in getting together a broad grouping of Syrian opposition, with a relatively "moderate" leader, at the "Riyadh 2" conference in November, but many opposition factions, mistrustful of Russia's motives, are threatening to boycott the Sochi congress. Meanwhile, Russia-Turkey-Iran unity may be tested by Kurdish aspirations in Syria and the support they may receive from the US. The Syrian Kurdish party PYD – which is the principal component of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces fighting ISIS in Syria – is now occupying swathes of Syria, including some valuable oilfields. According to the Russian media, Russia is separately mediating negotiations between the Syrian government and the PYD on a post-conflict settlement involving autonomy for the Kurds within a united Syria. Both Turkey and Iran have strong sensitivities on this issue, in view of their Kurdish minorities.

## India-Russia Interactions

The Russia-India-China ministerial meeting in Delhi on December 11 produced a detailed communique on largely expected lines. Paragraphs on the global economic and financial architecture, climate change and sustainable development reflected convergence of views. The paragraphs on terrorism contain the usual vanilla formulations, without specific finger-pointing. The need for an open and inclusive security and economic architecture in the Asia Pacific was expressed; trilateral consultations on the emerging scenario in this region are to be held in New Delhi in the first half of 2018. The traditional position of the three countries on the Palestinian issue was reiterated (without mention of Jerusalem). The Communique endorsed Russian initiatives in Syria, including plans for the Congress of national dialogue.

In a lecture at the Vivekananda International Foundation, Russian FM Lavrov spoke of the convergences in India-Russia relations. In interactions after his speech, he suggested that the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative provided useful connectivity ideas. While he understood India's sovereignty concerns, he said, Indian diplomacy was smart enough to figure out how to derive benefits from the Initiative, while protecting India's interests.

Russian Deputy PM Rogozin was in Delhi (December 23) for a periodical review of progress on military-technical cooperation. Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov visited for Foreign Office consultations. In a media interaction, he said India's case for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group was very different from that of Pakistan and that Russia would make this point to other countries, including China. (The Chinese spokesperson was subsequently quoted as saying that China's position on this matter had not changed.)

---

***(The views expressed are personal)***

*The Author can be reached at [raghavan.ps@gmail.com](mailto:raghavan.ps@gmail.com)*

---