



Ambassador P. S Raghavan

Convenor, National Security Advisory Board
Former Indian Ambassador to Russia (2014-16)

Overview

- The Trump Administration sustained a dialogue with Russia, withstanding domestic furore on the relationship.
- De-escalation zones: a delicate balancing act in the Syrian conflict.
- Resumed Russia-Europe dialogue acquired further momentum.
- President Putin attended the Belt & Road Forum in Beijing.

Russia & USA

The American “deep state” continued a vigorous pushback against President Trump’s declared intention to re-set relations with Russia. Regular leaks of classified information by administration and intelligence officials sustained media reports of Russian “meddling” in US elections, revealed fired FBI chief James Comey’s internal memos and exposed contacts of senior Trump campaign officials with Russia. The administration struggled to counter this nexus of political, intelligence and media agencies against it.

Amidst this furore, President Trump accepted a telephone call from President Putin on 2nd May for a conversation described by the Kremlin as “business-like and constructive” and by the White House as “very good”. They talked mainly about Syria, agreeing that their Foreign Ministers would work on some ideas for a political settlement. Foreign Minister Lavrov’s visit to Washington on May 10 generated fresh controversies, as the media reported (again based on helpful leaks from intelligence sources) that President Trump shared with FM Lavrov sensitive intelligence about ISIS operations, thereby compromising the source of that intelligence (which later leaks identified as Israel).

Cooperation on Syria continued largely below the news radar. US criticism of Russia’s role in Afghanistan was muted. President Trump’s pronouncements at the NATO and G7 Summits and readouts of his discussions with European leaders indicated attenuation of the anti-Russian rhetoric. The agitation in the Western media on President Trump’s omission to reiterate US commitment to Article V of NATO’s founding treaty (under which an attack on any NATO member will be treated as an attack on all) was precisely because Article V was drafted specifically in the context of the Soviet threat. In his speech at a NATO event in Brussels, President Trump clubbed “threats from Russia” with those from “NATO’s eastern and southern borders”. The White House readout of his meeting with the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission said they agreed to deepen security cooperation “in fighting ISIS, combating radicalization, and responding to other common threats” – with no mention of Russia, Ukraine or Crimea.

Developments in and around Syria and on Russia’s relations with major EU countries seemed to reflect this change in US emphasis. However, on the experience of the Trump Administration’s record so far, it is too early to predict what it means for a more comprehensive re-set of USA’s Russia policy. The Russians

themselves have been circumspect: while occasionally criticizing aspects of US policy, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokespersons have been careful to avoid any criticism of President Trump. In a number of interviews, President Putin has acknowledged President Trump's genuine interest in improving relations and has shown cautious optimism about it, even while hinting that the "deep state" (without using the term) might sabotage it.

Russia & Syria

The fourth round of the "Astana Process" talks on Syria on May 3-4 ended with signing of a document by Russia, Turkey and Iran, envisaging the creation of four "de-escalation zones" in Syria, where no military activity (including aerial) would be allowed and conducive conditions for humanitarian access would be created. The four zones are the city of Idlib, north of the city of Homs, the eastern Damascus suburb of Al Ghouta and Deraa in southern Syria. In effect, it recognized the areas of influence of various rebel groups, seeking to freeze the conflict in them and allowing the fight against the Islamic State to be pursued elsewhere in Syria.

The UNSG's Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, attended the talks and endorsed the outcome as a positive step for de-escalation of the conflict. It is clear that President Putin's telephone call to President Trump on May 2 was specifically to brief the latter on this initiative and to seek his concurrence to it. For the first time, a senior State Department official, Assistant Secretary Stuart Jones, attended the Astana talks. The State Department later cautiously welcomed the Astana outcome, expressing the hope that it would "contribute to de-escalation of violence ... and set the stage for a political settlement of the conflict", while at the same expressing reservations about Iran's involvement in the process and stressing the need for Russia to ensure compliance by the Syrian government. The statement significantly added, "we look forward to continuing our dialogue with the Russian Federation on efforts that responsibly end the Syria conflict".

Though the major external stakeholders in the Syria conflict – US, Russia, Iran and Turkey – endorse the de-escalation zones, arrangements to enforce them will require further delicate negotiations. The rebel groups in the safe zones have different external sponsors. The role of Iran in Syria will remain contentious. The question of how to deal with the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, which has an entrenched presence in Idlib, will need to be addressed. Turkey's fierce opposition to Kurdish militia involvement in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition creates another complication. Turkey cannot prevent even the Russians from coordinating with the Kurds. President Putin said frankly in a press conference on May 15 that since the Kurds are the best-trained and most combat-ready force in the anti-ISIS coalition, it is impractical to exclude them. He added that he had told President Erdogan this.

A Russian draft of a UN Security Council resolution, seeking endorsement of the Astana outcome, remains under discussion. Council members – mainly the US and France – are apparently seeking clarifications.

In the ultimate analysis, the US posture will be a critical factor in determining the direction of this initiative – a fact that President Putin has publicly – and repeatedly – acknowledged.

Russia & Europe

Following on the visit of the EU High Representative to Moscow (April 24; see Review, April 2017), there were major Russian interactions with Germany (May 2), Italy (May 17) and France (May 29) during the month. The emphasis in all these exchanges was on political and economic re-engagement.

Though Western economic sanctions and financing restrictions on Russia remain in place, all three countries noted significant increase in bilateral trade and investment. Russia's bilateral trade with Germany grew by 43% in January-February 2017. Germany is Russia's largest foreign investor with FDI of over US\$ 16 billion. Similarly, Russia-France bilateral trade increased by 14% in 2016 and by 23.7% in the first quarter of 2017. About 500 French companies operate in Russia and direct French investment in Russia increased by \$2.5 billion in 2016. With Italy, bilateral trade grew 28% in January-February 2017

and about 600 Italian companies operate in Russia. Over the past year and a half, European companies have increasingly found ways around trade and financing restrictions to continue business with Russia. In the past six months, they have been engaging much more openly.

Media reported that the Merkel-Putin exchanges were cold and formal. President Macron was aggressively blunt in his public statements. In contrast, the Russian-Italian exchanges were cordial – Italy has been among the strongest critics of sanctions on Russia.

However, all three EU leaders emphasized the importance of cooperation with Russia in the fight against international terrorism, supported the Astana process and advocated an intensification of bilateral educational, cultural and civil society links. France and Germany reiterated commitment to the “Normandy Four” mechanism to expedite implementation of the Minsk agreements in Ukraine. While the Italian Prime Minister was forthright in his criticism of sanctions on Russia, Chancellor Merkel said she would like them lifted “upon implementation of the Minsk agreements”.

In his listing of Russia-France bilateral issues at the joint press conference, President Macron gave top billing to the treatment of LGBTs in Chechnya and of NGOs in Russia, saying he had told President Putin “in no uncertain terms” what France expects on these issues. He went on to describe the Russian news agencies RT and Sputnik as “bodies of false propaganda”. President Putin chose not to respond to these broadsides.

The “Trump effect”, Brexit and the fallout of the West Asian conflicts may be nudging Europe to more pragmatic accommodation with Russia. Its course will depend on how the faultline between “new” and “old” Europe on this issue is addressed.

Russia & BRI

President Putin attended the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in Beijing on May 14 & 15, at which he was accorded the treatment of a principal guest. He has expressed support for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2015 and has talked about cooperation between the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB – the land component of BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union. For Russia, BRI presents both major challenges and attractive opportunities. The latter is exemplified by the acquisition of nearly 10% stake (worth US\$1.2 billion) in Russia’s Yamal LNG project by China’s Silk Road Fund (SRF), set up to promote BRI projects. SRF had earlier, in December 2015, extended a loan of about \$1 billion to finance the project. The challenges come from the increased Chinese economic and political influence in Central Asia – historically Russia’s backyard – that would result from the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Corridor of the SREB.

By endorsing BRI, President Putin seeks to avail of Chinese investment and financing for projects of his interest. However, he also struck a cautionary note in his speech at BRF: while accepting that connectivity and economic integration were important objectives, he emphasized that these new initiatives should be based on “universal and generally recognised foundations”, should take into account “specifics of member states’ national development models” and should be developed “openly and transparently” – much the same points as were made by India’s spokesperson on BRI. President Putin was asked by a Russian journalist whether Russia would not be economically “swallowed” by China. He responded, “we agree only to those proposals that benefit us, and if something benefits us and our economy, what is there to fear?”

(The views expressed are personal)

The Author can be reached at raghavan.ps@gmail.com
