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A renewed detente or a cold-war revisited?

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Defying media-polls and public opinion surveys, the thrilling and unexpected victory of the Republican candidate, Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential elections and the resounding downfall of the democratic presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton, evoked a motley of concerns and apprehensions but also jubilation and anticipation. Unsurprisingly, euphoric anticipations overwhelmed Russian-political elite, analysts and Kremlinologists were anxious for a better, improved atmosphere that might redress imbalances and fluctuations in the U.S.-Russian relations characteristic of Obama Administration under President Putin tenures.

It is not a matter of Trump's personal sympathies towards Putin or vice versa. There is a certain political calculation behind the move of the Republican presidential-elect, while endorsing the policy of the Russian leader, Trump was voicing a viewpoint that is widespread among his supporters who embrace a 'national patriotic ideology'. During the debate, Trump said Putin "out-smarted" Obama and Clinton on foreign policy and he expressed his readiness to find a common ground with the Russian President and tried 'to find a link' with Putin whom he sees not as the 'enemy of America', but rather as the 'symbol of decisiveness and success'. Consequently with governments worldwide

still trying to decipher Trump's syndrome and assess what his presidency would mean for global and regional politics, the U.S. and Russia could anticipate

pate a 'Grand Entente' with a Realpolitik deal. Russia has already shown an explicit interest in finding common grounds for cooperation with the new President-elect. ¹ Such interest resonated in circles in Washington. Voices both in Moscow and Washington, were explicitly wishful of a reinvigorated dialogue which could eventually transform into a renewed global détente. Hopes were pinned on both sides for a new beginning of a business-like relationship. Most essential for Russian perception of the new U.S. President-elect is his recognition of Russia's position as a global power which, in practice, amounts to inclusiveness and co-operation on pressing global and regional security issues. ² This perception is, however, not without serious misgivings and preoccupation. The Russian elite remains hesitant in view of the unpredictability of Trump's future foreign policy, particularly given Trump's avowed direct statement on revamping the nuclear deal with Iran of 2015.

According to some analyses, in case a new U.S. President would rethink a U.S.-Iran nuclear deal of September 2015, this would necessarily prompt global and regional security challenges; arms race, and more proxy confrontations.

¹ Pavel Koshin, Fostering a new dialogue between Russia and the U.S.

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/donald-trump-foreign-policy-challenges-by-joseph-s--nye-2016-11>

² *ibid*, page 2

In such nightmarish scenario, Russian backyard regional security in the caucuses, Central Asia, would be seriously imperiled with a potentially nuclearized Middle-East, further initiating a more aggressive Russian deterrence strategy and provoking Iran's quest for regional hegemony.

³ Thus escalating more Iranian-Saudi proxy war activities in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, any vacillation on the Iran nuclear deal will inevitably draw China into the equation to form a strategic triangle with Russia and Iran. Linked together with an energy lifeline through Eurasian heartland states, these three countries will ultimately challenge U.S. vital interests in the Levant, Gulf region and the Near East. For a U.S. president, such geostrategic developments could cause a potential reset of U.S. priorities and even forcing the U.S. to adapt in light of a Russian- Chinese- Iranian ascending influence in the Middle East.

Anticipating that the immediate priorities in the Middle East and North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Libya could be seriously pressing issues in Trump's agenda, a renewed U.S.-Russian détente would contribute to international endeavors to end the Syrian conflict and launch a more offensive counter-terrorism strategy against ISIS. This will have to acknowledge *prima facie* Russia as a global actor with a regional role in the Middle East and inevitably entail a new policy direction towards Russia's President Putin in jointly designing and implementing counterterrorism strategy.

Is the new administration ready to reorder the regional balance of power in the Middle East region through a realignment with Russia, perhaps even cooperating with Assad to fight the Islamic state? Many perceive such an overturn as being highly hazardous and could herald new turmoil in a region ravaged by multiple wars.

⁴The question may, however, be raised whether this will empower further violent extremists ,

⁵or will such a rebalancing cause a backtracking, if only temporarily, in view of the new administration abandoning President Obama's Saudi-Turkish allies. With a Russian- Iranian supported Assad regime, a militarily scale-down, and territorially shrinking ISIS, jihadist fighting gradually withdrawing and Iranian highly visible and influential role in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq could be regarded as a positive turnaround. While not totally disregarding the Saudi-Turkish-Sunni triangle, the new administration will have to redraw its new regional map of alignments according to its own political parameters and against a backdrop of changing Middle East variables. The ultimate goal would be to facilitate and cement political settlements addressing potential nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism, conflict resolution of crises which require a bold, visionary and strong leadership. In this context, resolving the Syrian "Gordian Knot" entangled with Assad's army, opposing rebels, untying the Kurdish fighters are highest on the conflict resolution scale of priorities.⁶Iran- Syria- Hezbollah Shiite Axis emerging and acting as a regional

³ Sigurd Neubauer, The U.S. Presidential elections and its implications on Middle East Policy

https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2383195/3/NUPI_Policy_Brief_10_Neubauer.pdf

⁴ Liz Sly, Washington Post. November 15, 2016. "Trump's Administration could upend the Middle East".

⁵ Charles Lister, Foreign Policy, November 17th, 2016. "Trump's Syria Strategy would be a disaster" pp 1-7.

⁶ Richard Hass, "America and the World in transition", Project Syndicate. pp. 1-3

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/donald-trump-foreign-policy-challenges-by-joseph-s--nye-2016-11>

player has to be dealt with not only as an adversary, but as a part of a “Grand deal” through a U.S.- Russian collective strategic outlook. Regarding the Palestinian - Israeli conflict: it still remains a highly contentious issue, as the two state-solution approach seems to be fading out with the rejectionist policies of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Therefore, a most formidable challenge, that defined most U.S. administration’s ingenuity, was to chart new paths towards a just, durable and peaceful settlement in the Middle East crisis.

The core of which is the perennial generations- old conflict. The question will always remain: Will the new administration be more creative, inventive and ingenious in working out an out-of-the box alternative? Trump’s foreign policy position seems to many, to be lacking in consistency and coherence; this will make it difficult to draw specific conclusions at this point.⁷ Even Trump’s declared pro-Israel position, his future involvement in the Israeli - Palestinian issue could be inevitably dictated, not only by his alleged love of Israel, but will be guided by more than just that.

The United States reshaped role in the region with Syria, Iran & Russia will also help reformulate U.S. policies towards the Palestinian - Israeli conflict. U.S. interrelated deals with regional and global actors will factor into Trump’s new moves in that direction, ensuring in particular the security of Israel as the U.S.’ fundamental concern.

It is very much conceivable that Trump’s Middle East foreign agenda will be dominated by Realpolitik imperatives.

A new strategic calculus between the U.S.’ new administration and Russia will have to encompass the Syrian drama with its many conflicting personae, “gallery players”, Iran’s enforced regional role with its extensions in Lebanon and the Gulf region, together with a vigorous, rebalanced approach to the Palestinian - Israeli peace process.

Attempting an early forecast of a potential shift and improvement in U.S.-Russia relation under Trump and Putin, one could say that changes might take place in Washington-Moscow relations depending to a great extent on the domestic policies of Russia, and the United States.⁸ Although Trump’s foreign policy agenda is yet to be drawn with the administration’s new team predictably, it will be fully loaded with hot issues regarding relations with Russia (and China).

Turmoil in the Middle East, with crumbling post-colonial borders, religious sectarian strife, radical jihadist terrorism, Syrian civil war, destabilized region, failed and failing states, doomed, or at least stalled Palestinian – Israeli talks within a highly volatile eruptive region will generate far reaching global security implications and impeding security threats.

In such a case, the new President-elect will have to restart a new dialogue with Russian President Putin to thrash out a multitude of issues in the Middle East, to respond to Putin’s game-changing and challenges to the post-1945 liberal order, on the use of force by states, to seize territory from their neighbors, while avoiding escalation, and focusing on issues of common concern such as nuclear security, non-proliferation, counter-terrorism, and regional issues like Iran, Afghanistan and Yemen. Indeed these ‘genuine interests’ would be best

⁷ Amos Yadlin, INSS, “Israel and the United States; an opportunity to strengthen the special relationship”

INSS insight No. 868. November 15, 2016. Pp 1-5.

⁸ Pavel Koshkin, Trump’s Presidency and the future of U.S Russian relations

served by dealing with Russia. No world will gain from a new cold war.⁹

Security safeguards to non-nuclear GCC and MENA states will have to be ensured by the U.S. and Russia to preempt a potential or non-conventional arms race. In such a scenario, Egypt's regional status would be immensely upstaged with an incremental space of action in the Levant and the GCC as an effective actor in counterterrorism strategy. Furthermore Egypt can restore its regional leverage in theD Palestinian - Israeli peace talks with an enhanced credibility due to a bolstered and reinforced strategic partnership with both centers of global power: Washington and Moscow.

⁹ Joseph Nye, Donald Trump's foreign policy challenges

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/donald-trump-foreign-policy-challenges-by-joseph-s--nye-2016-11>

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