

Let the bromance begin

BY MASSIMO BOFFA

Trump and Putin stand ready to ease tensions and work together toward a re-reset. But the antagonism between Moscow and Washington is deeply rooted, and the causes must be better understood.

They weren't necessarily rooting for Donald Trump in the Kremlin. The issue of Russian "interference" in the American presidential contest was widely touted at Clinton rallies, but it swiftly vanished along with much of the rhetorical exaggerations typical of a tough electoral campaign. Vladimir Putin himself had dismissed the charge with a wisecrack: "America isn't a banana republic, where results can be influenced by other countries." Actually, Moscow followed the progress of the contest with professional caution, "ready to collaborate" – according to diplomatic etiquette – "with whoever won," because both candidates had, in Russia's eyes, advantages and disadvantages. It is true that Hillary Clinton had announced a hardening of anti-Russian policy, but always following a known strategy, towards which countermeasures had already been studied. Certainly, Trump promised a radical rethinking of relations between the United States and Russia, showing sensitivity to some of Moscow's claims, but his total outsider unpredictability was set to oblige the Kremlin to reckon with a completely unprecedented scenario.

Furthermore, the Russians did not forget that Barack Obama, too, had inaugurated his first mandate with his "reset" vow – a pledge to end friction between the two countries and build a new partnership between Washington and Moscow – but then relations gradually deteriorated. That being said, however, it is clear that some of candidate Trump's stances on foreign policy were appreciated in the Kremlin, all the more so because these statements exposed him to harsh attacks from the American establishment and all the mainstream media: that the fight against terrorism

People walk past a mural on a restaurant wall depicting US President-elect Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin greeting each other with a kiss in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, May 13, 2016.



US President Barack Obama with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Los Cabos, Mexico, June 18, 2012.

must be considered a priority and Russia is an indispensable ally in this fight; that a deal must be found with Putin rather than viewing him as an enemy; that the American policy of destabilizing the Middle East (Iraq, Libya, Syria) had been a disaster, responsible for chaos and the expansion of radical Islamism; and the resounding public slap down of his running mate Mike Pence, who had gone so far as to back a no-fly zone over Syria, an issue dear to Hillary Clinton.

But that was Trump the candidate. We shall see what the commander-in-chief will be like. One should not be fooled by the loud applause from the Russian Duma the morning after the election. The comments by Russian analysts have been much more prudent. They point out that the deterioration in relations between Washington and Moscow has deep roots and, with all the good will in the world, it will take time to restore a minimum of mutual trust. All the more so because the new president won't be able to decide on his own: the Republican majority in Congress is proudly anti-Russian, as is much of the American establishment; and in order to realize his program, focused above all on domestic policy, Trump will have to reach

compromises (Obama, for instance, had promised the closure of Guantanamo, but then had to give precedence to deals on healthcare reform, which was closer to his heart). The choice of the men who will make up the administration will be a decisive step, with key appointments at the State Department and the Pentagon. Here too, among the various candidates who have been touted, one cannot yet see figures that promise to represent a clear break with the past.

Playing in Trump's favor, according to Russian analysts, is the fact that he is, just like Putin, a pragmatic man, far removed from the "human rights" rhetoric that has accompanied the White House's destabilizing policies around the world. Since interests and not ideals are at stake, he will be a negotiator. But here too the analysts have no illusions: he will be a tough negotiator. He will not make unilateral concessions without getting something substantial in exchange. All the more so because, having reached the presidency with the reputation of "Putin's friend," he will have to ward off the danger of appearing to be "weak." In other words, they are saying in Moscow that if there are significant novelties in relations between the two coun-



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tries they will occur gradually, perhaps not even before 2018, when Russia votes for a new president. And for the moment we neither expect a lifting of sanctions nor, still less, the recognition of the annexation of Crimea.

The prevailing tone of comments from Moscow, in short, is marked by the utmost prudence, as we wait to see what the new president's moves will be. However, some important steps towards detente may be reasonably expected in the two theaters where tension between the US and Russia has reached the most worrying levels, with the concrete threat of military escalation: Ukraine and Syria. Although there may not be any short-term developments, the risk of an unexpected worsening should have been averted. The Kiev government, or at least the most extremist forces inside it, has never abandoned the idea of resolving the problem of the status of Donbas by military force, and the option of sending Ukrainians "lethal weapons," albeit thus far refused, remains on the Pentagon's agenda. Trump seems to have no intention of undertaking such an adventure. And it is likely that the new president, for whom Ukraine is not a priority, will opt to delegate this dossier to Europe – that is, to Germany and France

(both of which face uncertain elections in 2017). Paradoxically, to judge from the first reactions from the European leadership classes, the capitals of the Old Continent risk being sidelined by the new direction. So far it has been Washington that has exerted the most energetic pressure to impose a hard line against the Kremlin. But now the Europeans, deprived of their American backing, will find themselves having to reckon with their internal divisions. As for the Ukraine dossier, the Minsk Accords may regain force, with an important novelty: up till now the pressure to implement them was primarily directed toward Moscow; while now more pressure is likely to be exerted on Kiev to get it to play its part.

The Syrian scenario appears even more promising. With the threat of a no-fly zone having been nixed, which Clinton aired up to the end and which risked leading to an armed conflict between the US and Russia, the situation on the ground is still shifting. In particular, parallel battles are being fought to conquer Aleppo and Raqqa, the former led by Moscow and the latter by Washington. Furthermore, in the Syria puzzle, regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran

US President George W. Bush, and Russian President Vladimir Putin met for the first time at the one-day summit at Brdo outside Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 16, 2001.



DON EMMERY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

US President Bill Clinton with Russian President Boris Yeltsin after their meeting at Hyde Park, London, October 23, 1995.

will also play roles, which can only partially be controlled by Washington and Moscow. Trump's first statements, however, which convey the message that ousting Bashar al-Assad is no longer a prerequisite for negotiations, raise hope that Syria will be one of the first terrains on which Russia and the US will seek, and perhaps find, an understanding.

But above and beyond the concrete steps that will be made on individual dossiers, what may change in the direction of detente is the overall approach to the Russian question. In the last few years, the elites of the US and Europe have imposed a unilateral narrative of the Russian situation, based on the conclusions that we were faced with a despotic country as far as domestic policy was concerned and an aggressive one as far as foreign policy was concerned. This is not the place to discuss the first of the two conclusions; let us just say that a more precise knowledge of what happened in that country after the dissolution of the USSR will help formulate less superficial and more historically grounded arguments. As for Russian aggression, which has served as a pretext for NATO's mobilization in Eastern Europe, the time is perhaps ripe for a more balanced

assessment of the thinking that underlies the Kremlin's foreign policy, first and foremost the imperative of not having hostile nations on its borders. Only then will it be possible to counterbalance the condemnation, in principle, of the annexation of Crimea, with the realization that the coup d'état in Ukraine and the attendant rise to power in Kiev of an overtly anti-Russian government were interpreted in Moscow as hostile actions and a threat to its security.

In recent years relations between the United States and Russia have reached their lowest level since the time of the Cold War. In order to gradually recover, the most urgent step will have to be restoring a relationship of mutual trust. It will take time, but if the two presidents, also thanks to their recognized pragmatism, start to understand one another, progress will be made in this direction. There are at least two terrains on which such an understanding promises to evolve positively. The first is that of a redefinition of geopolitical priorities. The two presidents have recognized that the main threat to peaceful co-existence come from "terrorism," and thus from the destabilization of the Middle East. In this perspective, the collaboration between



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Washington and Moscow is not only possible, but necessary. Russia experienced Islamist terrorism well before 9/11, at the time of the Chechen secession, and eventually managed to crush it. As such, Russia has all the right credentials to be an ally in this battle.

The second terrain is that of comprehending what Moscow's real objectives are. Continuing to repeat that the Kremlin wants to "restore the Soviet Union" does not help, and such an objective is pure fancy. Putin has always pursued (and is still pursuing) a different objective: reaching a general strategic accord with the United States, an accord that sees Russian interests being recognized and respected. In order to achieve this objective it is not necessary to have a "friend" in Moscow (as in Boris Yeltsin's time), but a "partner," to talk to, negotiate with, even in a tough way, and try to work out the inevitable differences, but in a spirit of collaboration, not a head-on clash. Russia, too, will have to give something up. No one, for example, will be able to openly guarantee it its traditional spheres of influence. But it will have to be assured, at least, that former Soviet countries not already in NATO, like Ukraine and Georgia, will remain neutral and not become pawns in

a game that aims to weaken it.

Ultimately, the US and Russia do not move on their own. New realities have come to the fore, starting with China, which are subverting the world's power hierarchies and do not fit into a unipolar (nor even bipolar) vision. One of the results of the incautious American policy after the Ukraine crisis was to push Moscow into Beijing's arms. It does not appear to have been a far-sighted strategy for Western interests. But this dynamic does not correspond to Russia's long-term interests either. That is one more reason for pragmatic and not hostile orientations to prevail in the White House and the Kremlin.

US President George Bush and his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev during a press conference in Moscow concluding the two-day US-Soviet Summit dedicated to disarmament, July 31, 1991.

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