

What Trump Can Expect from Putin

President Trump will have his first meeting with President Putin at a time of dangerous U.S.-Russian tensions, amid demands to “get tough,” but ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern, a former presidential briefer, urges Trump to see Putin’s side.

By Ray McGovern

In the style of a President’s Daily Brief for President Trump:

When you meet with President Putin next week, you can count on him asking you why the U.S. is encircling Russia with antiballistic missile systems.

Putin regarded the now-defunct Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as the key to maintaining the nuclear-weapons balance between the United States and Russia and told filmmaker Oliver Stone that the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty in 2001 and the follow-on U.S. deployment of ABM batteries could “destroy this balance. And that’s a great mistake.”

For decades, the Russians have viewed an invulnerable nuclear-tipped strategic missile force as a deterrent to a U.S. attack though they have never displayed an inclination to commit suicide by actually firing them.

From this perspective, Putin wonders why the U.S. might seek to upset the nuclear balance by deploying ABM systems around Russia’s borders, making Russia’s ICBM force vulnerable.

Putin’s generals, like yours, are required to impute the most provocative intentions to military capabilities; that is what military intelligence is all about. Thus, they cannot avoid seeing the ABM deployments as giving the U.S. the capability for a first strike to decapitate Russia’s ICBM force and, by doing so, protecting the U.S. from Russian nuclear retaliation.

And, as Putin has made clear, the Kremlin sees U.S. claims that the deployments are needed to thwart a strategic strike from Iran as insultingly disingenuous – all the more so in light of the 2015 multilateral agreement handcuffing Iran’s development of a nuclear bomb for the foreseeable future.

Yet, the U.S.-Russia strategic balance becomes more and more precarious with the deployment of each new ABM site or warship, together with rising concerns at the possibility of a U.S. technological breakthrough. With the time window for Russian leaders to evaluate data indicating a possible U.S. nuclear strike closing, launch-on-warning becomes more likely – and so does World War III.

Your visit to Warsaw en route to Hamburg for the G-20 summit will shine the

spotlight on the threat Putin sees in the deployment of missile defense systems in Poland – as well as Romania and elsewhere on Russia’s periphery.

It is no secret that Russian leaders feel double-crossed by NATO’s steady creep eastward, but Russia’s strategic planners seemed to believe they could handle that – up to a point. That point was reached with the Feb. 22, 2014 *coup d’etat* in Ukraine, which Moscow viewed as one U.S.-backed regime change too many and one that installed a virulently anti-Russian government along a route historically used by foreign invaders.

On April 17, 2014, the day before Crimea was re-incorporated into Russia, Putin spoke of what motivated Russia’s strong reaction. The “more important” reason he gave was the need to thwart plans to incorporate Ukraine and Crimea into the anti-ballistic missile deployment encircling Russia.

Putin explained: “This issue is no less, and probably even more important, than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this.”

ABM: ‘A Separate Issue’

In his interviews with Oliver Stone (aired on Showtime as “The Putin Interviews”), Putin made the same distinction between the NATO buildup (bad enough) and ABM deployment (more dangerous still), telling Stone the ABM challenge is “a separate issue which no doubt is going to require a response from Russia.”

Putin blames your predecessors for his mistrust of Washington on this important issue. He has branded a huge mistake President Bush’s 2001 decision to exit the ABM Treaty – an agreement that sharply limited the number of permitted anti-ballistic missile sites – noting that the Treaty had been for three decades the “cornerstone of the system of national security as a whole.”

Putin’s misgivings were hardly allayed by President Obama’s ten-second *pas de deux* five years ago with Dmitry Medvedev in South Korea. An ABC open mike picked up their private conversation on March 26, 2012, at a summit on nuclear security in Seoul.

Obama is heard assuring then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that the missile defense issue “can be solved,” but that it was “important for him (Putin) to give me space.” President Obama asked Medvedev to tell Putin that Obama would have “more flexibility” after being re-elected. More flexibility or no, the missile defense program proceeded unabated, with Washington shunning bilateral talks.

It is now five years later, but there will be a residue of distrust on Putin's part with respect to ABM deployment. We still expect Putin to show his characteristic reserve, but you will be dealing with someone who feels he's been diddled on this key issue, and who, on occasion, gets angry when others don't grasp the gravity of this potentially existential moment.

For example, speaking to journalists on June 17, 2016, Putin criticized the reasons that the U.S. gives for the need to deploy ABM systems, especially the "threat from Iran." Observing their apathetic reaction, Putin uncharacteristically lost his cool.

Given this history, you will have a suitcase of mistrust to overcome in talks with Putin. It will take more than smooth Obama-style reassurances to allay the Russian President's misgivings over Washington's intentions on missile defense.

Given the priority he places on the challenge, however, he may propose that U.S. and Russian negotiators begin to talk seriously about the issue.

Lost Opportunities

It may be helpful to recall that less than four years ago U.S.-Russian relations were in a much more positive place. After a disputed sarin incident outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, Putin helped Obama out of a geopolitical corner by persuading Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to surrender Syria's entire chemical weapons inventory, under close U.N. supervision, for destruction on a U.S. ship.

A few days later, on Sept. 11, 2013, Putin placed an op-ed in The New York Times, titled "A plea for caution from Russia," the last part of which he is said to have drafted himself:

"My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism ...

"It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional ... There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. ... We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal."

Russia then played a central role in facilitating Iran's concessions regarding the nuclear accord that President Obama considered perhaps his greatest diplomatic achievement, with the key interim agreement reached on Nov. 24, 2013. But Putin felt betrayed when Obama's State Department helped organize the coup

in Ukraine just three months later.

Since the Ukraine crisis, U.S. media and political circles have subjected Putin to an unrelenting demonization, including comparisons of him to Adolf Hitler and an over-the-top campaign to blame him for Hillary Clinton's defeat and the Trump presidency.

Yet, while the tone of the Russia-bashing in Washington has reached hysterical levels, the Defense Intelligence Agency has just published a balanced assessment of "Russia's Threat Perceptions," which offers a view from Moscow's vantage point:

"Since returning to power in 2012, Russian President Putin has sought to reassert Russia as a great power on the global stage and to restructure an international order that the Kremlin believes is tilted too heavily in favor of the United States at Russia's expense.

"Moscow seeks to promote a multipolar world predicated on the principles of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in other state's internal affairs, the primacy of the UN, and a careful balance of power preventing one state or group of states from dominating the international order. ...

"Moscow has sought to build a robust military able to project power, add credibility to Russian diplomacy, and ensure that Russian interests can no longer be summarily dismissed without consequence."

A fair assessment, in our view.

Ray McGovern was a CIA analyst for 27 years, during which he served as chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. He also prepared the *President's Daily Brief* under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, conducting the early morning briefings under Reagan.
