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All Eyes On Munich As Russia Feels Out New U.S. Administration

Russia, like the rest of the world, will use the security conference to figure out the new U.S. administration

By Matthew Bodner

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Reuters

At last year's Munich Security Conference — a traditional get together for the transatlantic alliance — Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev delivered a stark warning. It was time for the West to end sanction, he said, and join forces in a civilizational battle against radical Islam.

"It is either us or them," Medvedev intoned. "It is time for everyone to realize this."

His call fell on wearied, and unsympathetic ears. 2016 was a trying time for many of the attendees, after all. Russia's actions in Syria exacerbated a migrant crisis sweeping Europe.

Ukraine continued to pose a security dilemma. U.S. global leadership was under question.

Doing his best to calm the West's collective nerves, then Secretary of State John Kerry in turn took the stage. He assured them Washington would not abandon its security commitments to Europe.

Today, Kerry is gone. And the transatlantic community is waiting with baited breath to find out what Trump's administration will bring. The 2017 conference, taking place Feb. 17- 19, is expected to shed first light on that. Trump is sending his A-Team: Vice President Mike Pence, Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Trump's delegation was also expected to feature former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. But Flynn dramatically resigned his post on Feb. 14, over allegations he illegally contacted Russian officials.

Flynn was among the strongest voices pushing for a "reset" with Russia. It is not clear yet what impact the resignation will have on U.S. policy. But signals from Washington suggest the White House was already leaning toward continuity: sanctions on Russia and support for NATO.

The 2017 conference also marks the 10-year anniversary of Russian President Vladimir Putin's infamous speech in which he set out an aggressive expression of Moscow's worldview. He railed against NATO, U.S. hegemony, democracy-promotion, missile defense, and the militarization of outer space.

Observers were shocked by his candor. But for Putin, it was the start of an assertive Russian foreign policy designed to return Russia to its "rightful" role in the world. "It is hardly necessary to provoke us," he said. "Russia has a history of more than 1000 years, and it has always had the privilege of carrying out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today."

Ten years on, Putin's belligerent words feel prescient. But while Moscow has used force to gain outsized influence over international affairs, it has yet to drive a wedge between NATO allies. In fact Putin, ironically, reinvigorated NATO. In Trump, Moscow saw an unexpected opportunity to undermine the alliance. Trump himself appeared to sympathize with some of Russia's foreign policy concerns.

But in appearing too eager for a detente with Trump, Russia may have again missed its opportunity. Moscow's support for Trump seems to have become a political liability. It was not Flynn's controversial views on Islam that proved to be his undoing, but ties with Russia.

Moscow's elation over Trump was already beginning to show signs of wear before Flynn's resignation. The Kremlin's objectives for the 2017 Munich Conference now appear to be conservative. The senior representative on Russia's delegation will be Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Lavrov is not a policymaker. He will instead be there only to meet his U.S. counterpart, Tillerson. The two will first meet in Bonn.

"Russia will not be saying anything new," says Alexander Gabuev, an expert in Russian foreign policy at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank. "They will be there to listen to what

the Americans have to say."

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