

Why Russia Won't Cave to Western Demands (Op-ed)

Russia won't agree to the West's conditions for reconciliation — at least not in an election year

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Vladimir Putin is running a diplomatic marathon this month. On May 2, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a stop-over in Sochi to talk to the Russian president about Ukraine and Syria. The following day, Turkish President Erdogan arrived to sort out Russia and Turkey's tangled maneuvers in Syria. On May 10-11, Israeli and Palestinian leaders will consult with Putin, and a few days later Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte will arrive in Moscow.

However, behind the scenes of these frantic diplomatic maneuvers, the Kremlin is nervous. It does not believe that any of its strategic objectives — like the lifting of Western sanctions —

are easily attainable.

The meeting with Merkel certainly did not go well. Sanctions on Russia are set to remain in place, and there was no discussion of reinstating Russia's G8 membership. The German Chancellor brushed off Putin's narrative about the origins of the Ukraine crisis. Merkel also hardened Berlin's position on how the Minsk agreements are to be implemented: Ukraine needs to receive control of its border before all the political conditions — including local elections — are implemented

Merkel also added two sensitive humanitarian issues to the Russia-West agenda — [the persecution of gays in Chechnya and Russia's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses](#).

But the Kremlin's greatest frustration is still with Washington. During [Secretary Tillerson's talks in Moscow last month](#), the Trump administration bluntly outlined its vision for a grand bargain with Moscow that stunned the Kremlin.

Washington has strongly conditioned an improvement in US-Russia relations on Moscow's change of policies on Syria and Ukraine, but also on Afghanistan, the INF Treaty and meddling Western elections.

To add insult to injury, [U.S. National Security Advisor general H.R. McMaster](#) called for a shift in rhetoric and a change in Russia's actions in an interview with Fox News on Sunday, April 30.

"What we really need to see is change in behavior," he said. "Russian President Vladimir Putin is acting against the Russian people's interest in his relationship with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his policies to aid the Taliban in Afghanistan, [...] and doing it, I think, just kind of reflexively," McMaster said.

This did not go down well in Moscow.

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Moscow has three main problems with this approach. First, it cannot afford to give the impression it is changing policy due to U.S. pressure. Yielding to the U.S. would put Putin on the same slippery path of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, with the corresponding drop in public support in Russia. For the Kremlin, this would be suicidal in an election year.

The second problem is that Washington has not exactly spelled out what a dramatic improvement in the relationship would actually produce, apart from lifting sanctions. The Trump administration has shown little enthusiasm for engaging on Moscow's preferred topics like security in Europe, or recognizing an updated world order with Russia as a superpower. The Kremlin does not see a bag of goodies appealing enough for it to radically shift course. It looks like a sour deal for Moscow.

The third problem is that a meaningful course-correction on most issues is hard to do fast without telegraphing weakness. It may be possible for Russia to engineer some change in policy in Syria. Recent Russian proposals for "four de-escalation zones," and the basing of the Syrian air force at the Russian airbase that facilitates tighter Russian control, together

with Putin's offer for the US to play a role in the political settlement, may point in that direction.

[But on Ukraine, Moscow is stuck](#). It cannot agree to what Tillerson and now Merkel have outlined as the Western precondition — unilateral military withdrawal from Donbass and the transfer of the border to Kiev — before the political parts of Minsk-2 are implemented.

This would be a stark demonstration of weakness and a unilateral abandoning of an advantageous negotiating position over Ukraine's future. The lifting of Western sanctions may not compensate the loss of face that such a "course correction" entails. It is unlikely such a policy U-turn could be made by Moscow on Putin's watch.

The same logic applies to the [disagreements over the INF Treaty](#). Moscow cannot agree that it has violated the treaty, as the US asserts, without the U.S. admitting that it also violated the treaty by deploying missile defense systems in Romania. And Russia certainly couldn't correct the violation.

Moscow feels slighted that the Trump administration is dragging its feet over the first meeting between the two leaders. Especially as Trump seems to open the doors of Mar-a-Lago to almost everyone else.

Washington thinks, correctly, that an early get-to-know-you summit is more important for Putin than for Trump, who needs a clear-cut win from such a meeting. Perhaps they might cobble together some kind of a deal on the political settlement in Syria by the time Trump and Putin meet at the G20 summit in Germany.

The much-touted "grand bargain" appears to be off the table — superseded by piecemeal agreements, and only where Moscow has something to offer of interest to Trump's America.

Still, given where we are coming from, that is better than nothing.

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