

Russia's Response to Sanctions Shows Restraint (Op-ed)

But that could change

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Mikhail Klimentyev / TASS

On Friday, Russia ordered the United States to reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia and restricted access to two U.S. properties in Moscow. The move looks like a direct response to a Senate vote on fresh Russia sanctions.

Russia's response is designed to vent Moscow's outrage, but it is also designed to avoid irreparable damage to its relationship with President Donald Trump.

Putin hasn't given up entirely on his personal investment in Donald Trump. The staff cuts are actually a delayed response to President Barack Obama's decision in December 2016 to expel 35 Russian diplomats and seize diplomatic compounds in the United States.

With promises of close Russian cooperation on Trump's signature issues like combating international terrorism and illegal immigration, Moscow's statement radiated support for Trump. It even blamed "Russophobes" in Congress for ruining the U.S.-Russia relationship.

"For diplomats and spies, expulsions come with the job description"

The expulsions are the least painful way that both countries can register their displeasure with each other, without actually inflicting bodily harm. They don't scar the relationship too badly. They don't impact on core national interests. They are easily reversed.

Keep in mind that in early 2001 the United States and Russia expelled 50 diplomats respectively. By the end of the year, they were military allies fighting al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration opted for Russian diplomatic expulsions as retaliation for Russian cyber meddling in the U.S. election precisely because it wanted to send a message, but feared retaliating through cyber attacks could be destabilizing. For diplomats and spies, expulsions come with the job description.

In this context, the latest Russian action is relatively restrained. The United States can plan staff reductions in an orderly fashion (the 35 Russian diplomats were given 72 hours to leave the country on New Year's Eve). The seizure of diplomatic properties is direct retaliation for Washington's seizure of Russian recreational compounds.

If the new staff limit includes Russian service staff, the reductions in U.S. diplomatic positions will be small, perhaps a few dozen. It won't be the hundreds of expulsions reported by Russian media. Core operations, including intelligence gathering, won't be impacted.

Related article: [Russia Orders U.S. Embassy Staff Cuts in Sanctions Retaliation](#)

It isn't clear if the 455 quota, compared to its current estimates of 1100, includes Russia's United Nations Mission in New York, or if it is limited to the embassy and four consulates. If not, the U.S. is likely to retaliate by applying the limit to all Russian diplomats in the country, including the UN Mission.

We aren't through the expulsions saga yet. There is a new U.S. law that mandates Cold War travel restrictions on Russian diplomats in the U.S. starting in September. They will likely be matched by similar restrictions on American diplomats in Russia.

We are back to the fall of 1986 when massive diplomatic expulsions ended with similar limits on U.S. and Soviet diplomatic presence. Those limitations were only lifted after the fall of the Soviet Union.

For Russia, the new legislation, which President Trump [signaled](#) he will sign into law, is worse than Obama-era sanctions. The law codifies and expands the Obama sanctions, but contains no end date provisions or review process.

The lifting of sanctions would require Trump to certify that Moscow has reversed its course on its core national security interests, particularly in Ukraine.

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It puts Trump in a position where his administration would not be able to strike any “grand bargains” with Moscow, because Congress would have to sign off. That includes deals like trading Russia’s cooperation in Syria, Afghanistan and North Korea for acquiescing to Russian interests in Ukraine.

For Moscow, Trump is now a weak president, unable to deliver on agreements with Putin. Still, the hope for Trump reasserting himself on Russia policy is not completely dead yet. That’s why Russia won’t retaliate for sanctions with anything more serious than diplomatic expulsions.

Further down the road, without a meaningful turnaround in U.S.–Russian relations, Moscow may decide to exploit the geopolitical opportunities that Trump’s foreign policy keeps creating, to bring more pressure to bear on the U.S. where it hurts most.

It would exploit the rift between Washington and the EU over Russia sanctions. With China, Russia is likely to obstruct U.S. policies to isolate North Korea. Moscow may attempt to undermine U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan by providing covert support for the Taliban. It would exploit Washington’s attempts to undo the Iran deal.

The tit-for-tat we are seeing now is right out of the Cold War playbook. Unfortunately, both for Russia and the United States, reigniting the Cold War would also require hoping for a different result.

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