

## The world is right to be concerned by Donald Trump's unwarranted praise of Russia



Featured image credit: **NASA HQ PHOTO**

*Dr Thomas Leeper, Assistant Professor in Political Behaviour in the Department of Government at the LSE, reflects on the US-Russian relationship and how this relationship may change under a Trump presidency.*

Donald Trump will be the most pro-Russian American President in recent memory. While an easing of tensions between the world's sole superpower and its longtime foe may have some upsides for international relations, Trump's compliments of the current Russian government and his defence of Russia – despite mounting evidence of its meddling in the 2016 Presidential election – showcase his willingness to ignore political traditions and his own government's expert advice. While the Obama administration has handled Russia with a heavy stick – imposing sanctions and frequently criticising Russian domestic and foreign policy – the President-elect is poised to change course dramatically. His position is at odds with long-standing US policy, with American public opinion, and possibly with the interests of the world as a whole.

### **Media portrayal of Russia as 'the enemy'**

Anyone raised in the United States – even those of us brought up after the fall of the Soviet Union – learn early on about Russia as the enemy, about the precarious Cold War nuclear arms race, and about the Reagan administration's "victory" over the Soviet Union. The rivalry continues to penetrate the public imagination. Otherwise lighthearted Hollywood films keep the Cold War tensions salient: in *X-Men: First Class* the eponymous superheroes are given a pivotal role in Cold War military engagement; and *The Americans*, an FX drama, stokes fears of Russian sleeper agents living inside the United States.

These media portrayals dramatise an entirely real, ongoing, and not terribly positive political relationship. As the only state power that has the capacity to fundamentally threaten American security, Trump's positivity toward the current Russian regime is surprising. He has repeatedly

praised Putin's strength and intelligence, appointed cabinet officials with close ties to the Kremlin, and taken Russia's side in the ongoing controversy surround Russian efforts to shape the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election. Given the documented history of high-level Soviet and Russian espionage – including CIA analyst Aldrich Ames, FBI Agent Robert Hanssen, a ring of Russian agents arrested in 2010, and the recent expulsion of suspected spies hiding under diplomatic protection – it seems odd to argue that Russia hasn't had means, motive, and opportunity to infiltrate and antagonise the United States.

## American Government and public views of Russia

American policies toward Russia reflect a multitude of disagreements at the international and domestic levels. Russian foreign policy has often run in opposition to that of the United States, such as Russia's support for the al-Assad regime in Syria and its military escalations in Eastern Europe. Similarly, Russia's disappearing democratic institutions diverge from the American government's long-standing (though often poorly executed) commitment to liberal democratic values. The American government has rightly been critical of Putin's dangerous consolidation of power, takeover of national media, violent suppression of political opposition, among other domestic policies and practices.

Given these diverging policies and commitments to authoritarian rather than liberal government, the Putin regime and the American government have little reason to hold mutual good will. And that is reflected in public views on both sides of the world.

An August 2015 [report by the Pew Research Center](#) reported that Americans held overwhelmingly negative views of Russia. A large majority – 67% – were unfavourable and only 22% were favourable toward the nation. (As context, only a handful of – mostly Eastern European nations – held less positive views of Russia.) Americans' attitudes toward Vladimir Putin were similarly (75%) unfavourable. Pew data also suggests that the feeling is mutual: only 15% of Russians hold favourable views of the United States.

Americans' attitudes can be stated even more categorically: since Gallup started asking the question in 1999, [no more than one-quarter of Americans](#) have ever considered Russia to be an American ally. In 2014, 24% characterised Russia as an "enemy" and a further 44% described the country as "unfriendly" (the highest ratings ever in the Gallup series).

Despite these long-standing and perhaps increasing animosities, the second half of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump has brought a fascinating shift in public views. A [YouGov poll from December](#) showed that while Americans as a whole continue to hold unfavourable views of Russia and Putin, supporters of President-elect Donald Trump diverge from the national trend. They remain, on balance, negative but 35% hold favourable views toward Putin and 28% consider Russia to be an ally. [Politico](#) provided a good discussion of why views might be changing.

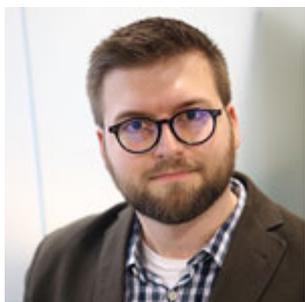
## Changing relations with Russia and the potential consequences

While Democratic and Republican leaders have long held critical views of Russia, the past few months have seen a dramatic polarisation of viewpoints. Democrats have held steadfast in their concerns about Russia, while Republicans have divided with traditional hawks – like Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham – criticising the President-elect for his pro-Russian views but numerous others taking well to this radical change of position. If Republicans eventually rally around the President's view, we should expect Republican voters to follow the leader. This would create a domestic cleavage surrounding US-Russian relationships for what may be the first time in American history and serve as a dramatic reversal of the Republican Party's foreign policy platform.

The lingering question, however, is whether warming relations will have any tangible consequences. No doubt American sanctions will be eased and Putin's suppression of democratic institutions and his political opposition will continue. Trump's anti-interventionist [campaign](#)

promises likely also mean a pulling back of American forces from the Middle East and a diminished American role in NATO and the United Nations Security Council. But most concerning for world order is Trump's praise of Russian nuclear armament, his calls for a renewed global nuclear arms race, and his apparent willingness to dispatch nuclear weapons, even in Europe. If Trump sees no threat in Russia's nuclear stockpile, his foreign policy in other regions (for example, the Middle East) invites a complete breakdown of the post-WWII "nuclear taboo" and an opening of the door for Russia and other nuclear powers to engage their arsenals at-will.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the acclaimed 19<sup>th</sup> century observer of American political culture, noted in his 1835 treatise, *Democracy in America*, that Russia and the United States would hold a unique place in history: "Each seems called by some secret design of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world." Some may have thought that the Cold War fulfilled that destiny and the post-Soviet era might bring a new balance of global power. It seems, however, that increasingly sympathetic American-Russian relations will mean they may work in tandem to shape the whole world's destiny. Americans and their European allies are right to be nervous about the coming years.



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*Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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