

Donald Trump is fulfilling campaign promises – to Vladimir Putin



President Trump caused consternation at this week's NATO summit with his pointed comments about Germany's energy dealings with Russia. [Hadas Aron](#) and [Emily Holland](#) write that this rhetoric plays closely into Russian President Vladimir Putin's goal of ending American hegemony. Whether Trump is working on Putin's behalf is immaterial, they argue; his foreign policy actions are undermining the liberal world order to Russia and its leader's benefit.

During this week's NATO summit, President Trump roasted the NATO secretary over breakfast and delivered [a blistering critique](#) of Germany for its extensive energy dealings with Russia. Although this appeared to be a rare instance of Trump taking a stand against Russian president Vladimir Putin, this was not the case. In fact, like most of Trump's actions in the international arena, his latest encounter with NATO was simply a further construction of Putin's worldview.

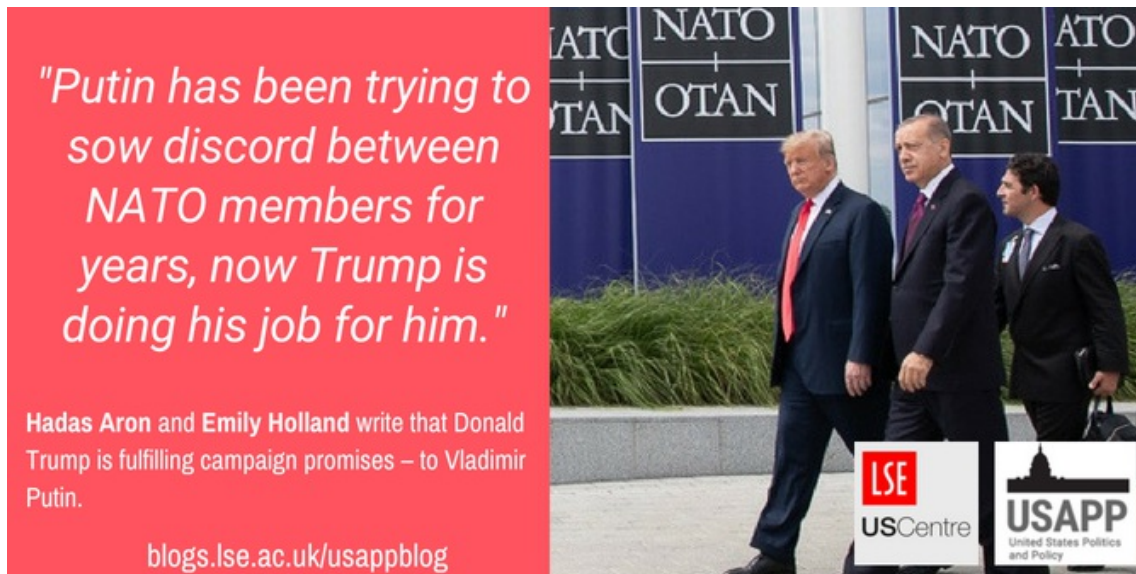
Over a decade ago, before Russia's wars in Georgia and Ukraine, Putin had wild international aspirations and foreign policy goals. First and foremost, he wished to breakdown NATO and sow divisions between its members. The presence of the military alliance on Russia's border in the Baltic States and in the former Soviet Bloc was and still is an anathema to Russia. It is viewed as both a real threat to Russian security and integrity, and as a symbol of humiliation and loss of empire. The best way to eliminate the threat of NATO, Putin reasons, is to break the interests of the alliance by separating East and West Europe, as well as alienating the United States.

Second, Putin sought to build a network of like-minded leaders at the expense of powerful liberals. The most notable target is Germany's Angela Merkel— a conservative-liberal woman effectively heading Russia's most powerful neighbor, the EU.

Next, Putin wanted to cultivate a crony capitalist economic environment where the norms of transparency no longer prevail. This is modeled on Russia's domestic economic system, where deals are made behind closed doors by a small group of oligarchs.

Finally, Putin's biggest and most outrageous desire was to end US hegemony. Given Russia's limited economic and military capabilities in 2007, this was a preposterous overreach. But after the 2008 financial crisis and lingering fatigue from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, what had been a fantasy became an actual possibility. These two circumstances led to President Obama's penchant for relative isolationism, which in turn gave Putin an opening to cultivate a larger and more aggressive presence on the world stage. Most important was Obama's meek reaction to Russian action in Ukraine and Syria, which legitimized and encouraged Putin's actions as well as undermined the US's role as global guardian.

Under Obama's presidency, Russian aspirations were merely within reach. But the Trump presidency has helped make Russia's worldview the new international reality. Trump's foreign policy has taken Putin's wish list for the international system and treated it as campaign promises.



“President Trump & the First Lady’s Trip to Europe” by [The White House](#) is [Public Domain](#)

Even before taking office, Trump was consistently critical of NATO. His [comments this week](#) were not a constructive criticism between allies, but rather a clear attack on the institution itself and its members. Trump is not only criticizing the workings of NATO, but its very purpose and necessity. Putin has been trying to sow discord between NATO members for years, now Trump is doing his job for him.

Second on Putin’s wish list was to create a network of like-minded leaders while weakening powerful liberals. From [his first week in office](#), Trump demonstrated open animosity to traditional liberal allies including the innocuous Canada, Australia, and of course Germany. Since Trump’s election, Angela Merkel has become almost the sole beacon of liberalism in the international system, as well as a frequent target of Trump’s tirades. He has [criticized](#) Germany’s migrant policy, and both domestic and international economic policy. The combination of Trump’s style and the European migrant crisis has actually helped to undermine Merkel’s position within Germany, making possible Putin’s goal of eliminating the irksome German Chancellor. Aside from disdain for Merkel’s liberalism, Putin has a personal dislike of Merkel, as evidenced by [this notorious encounter](#). Trump’s almost personal attack on Merkel this week does far more to divide European and US interests than it can ever hurt Russia. The longstanding, inevitable, and mutually beneficial energy relationship between Russia and Germany is not going to change because of Trump’s comments. As evidenced by Merkel’s [prickly response](#), the German-US relationship however, might.

Another issue driving a wedge between the US and its allies is Trump’s trade war. Trump’s tariffs on traditional friends and foes alike may lead to new economic alliances that exclude the US, and might also exclude US liberal standards of doing business. The obvious beneficiaries of this are China and Russia. China may well lose due to American tariffs, but in the long run these new economic arrangements favor crony capitalism and diminish transparency, labor, and environmental standards. This is something that Putin has cultivated for many years within the Soviet bloc and would be happy to see spread to a wider international arena. Trump’s personal business dealings and their entanglement with his elected office also legitimize an opaque economic system.

Finally, Putin’s most outlandish goal—ending American hegemony—is far more attainable now than ever before. Trump’s America First ideology emphasizes retreat from America’s hegemonic role. Even Trump’s more interventionist actions are supporting Russia’s vision of a world with multiple sources of power. By pulling out of the Iran deal, Trump opened the door for a new deal that excludes the US. Over and over again Trump generates opportunities for China, Russia, and other powers to encroach on US traditional spheres of influence. This not only cuts away the US’ global role, but also promotes an increasingly less liberal world.

Does all of this imply that Trump is an envoy of Putin in the White House? We cannot say, but it doesn't necessarily matter if Putin placed Trump in the White House, because Trump is already acting according to Putin's interests. We have argued before that Trump's biggest threat is not to American democracy, but rather to the liberal world order. This is not a priority for American voters, and so it will not drive Trump or his supporters out of office, but as liberals who believe that liberalism is a better set of ideals to live by, we should all be concerned.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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