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Three Things Putin Will Love About Trump

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Abstract

In less than a year, Donald Trump has moved from crass outsider to the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. How could a candidate who seemed so unlikely not too long ago possibly become the next president of the United States? [*excerpt*]

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Three Things Putin Will Love About Trump

By William Bowman

June 07, 2016

In less than a year, Donald Trump has moved from crass outsider to the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. How could a candidate who seemed so unlikely not too long ago possibly become the next president of the United States?

Many things about Trump just do not seem to add up. But there is one aspect of the Trump phenomenon that is entirely rational: Russian President Vladimir Putin's open admiration for the Republican frontrunner. To the Russian leader, a Trump presidency is a win-win-win scenario. Having long ago abandoned any pretense of creating a healthy political culture in Russia, Putin feeds off crises -- especially geopolitical difficulties -- that allow him to maintain or enhance his authoritarian hold.

If Trump is elected, here are three scenarios that would play directly into Putin's hands:

Slow and Reactive: Trump is slow to surround himself with experienced international hands -- sometimes outright refusing their help. President Trump turns out to be so naive about global affairs that Putin is able to push him around and make him react to Russia's moves. As Trump, a newcomer to international politics, has not shown much awareness of geopolitical realities, he may not be a match for such a tough foe as Putin.

An unwitting partner: Trump plays even further into Putin's hands by consciously or unconsciously endorsing the latter's geopolitical stances. Because ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other organizations pose clear and present dangers to international security, Putin and Trump conclude that Russia and the United States should deal with these groups in the strongest possible terms.

Trump says ISIS's days are numbered, even if he will not say how or when he will end their reign of terror. He says waterboarding is too gentle, and that he will go after ISIS members' families. Such measures would almost certainly backfire, but they give an indication of the tough-guy image Trump wishes to project.

With no international vision, Trump might decide to make common cause with Putin in launching ill-conceived but domestically popular military moves against real and perceived global enemies. Putin's attempts to project Russia as a world power would be enhanced by such a partnership, and could embolden him to run rogue in places such as Ukraine to handle a "local" conflict without much opposition from a globally aggressive Trump administration.

Cold War Heats Up: Trump attempts to engage Russia in meaningful global dialogue, fails miserably, and Putin ramps up the Cold War rhetoric already in circulation. Putin's anti-European Union, anti-NATO statements and policies become more strident, and the Trump administration reacts by digging in its heels. The United States returns to a late 1950s or early 1960s Cold War global mindset.

An us-versus-them political divide could serve the political styles of both men and enable them to expand their domestic support. Creating global crisis and tension certainly would help Putin, especially with the Russian military and intelligence communities.

Putin and his allies no doubt have already calculated that they could use and contain Trump for their own purposes. With his ego, Putin believes he can handle an international neophyte like Trump and make him act in predictable fashion in international affairs.

But then again, there is Trump's boast that he will make American foreign policy less predictable. And who knows, he may prove to be just as unpredictable in office as he has been on the campaign trail.

In that case, all bets are off, including the ones being made in Moscow during this unusual American presidential election.

William D. Bowman is professor of history at Gettysburg College and an Eastern European scholar. The views expressed are the author's own.