WILL RUSSIA CONTINUE TO PLAY THE ROLE OF SPOILER?

U.S. relations with Russia have been in a tailspin for almost three years. Moscow’s decision in early 2014 to annex Crimea and use military force there and in Eastern Ukraine put a seeming end to almost a quarter century of Western efforts to engage and integrate Russia. In their place has come a spiral of tension and a new conventional wisdom that whatever the path forward, the United States and its allies are in for a long, tough ride with the Russians.

In the wake of the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, however, not a few have asked if this is still the case. The president-elect has made a point of his desire to mend fences with Russian president Vladimir Putin. This has led to speculation, in Russia and the West, that the incoming administration will seek some sort of deal with the Kremlin, ending the standoff and setting the stage for a categorically new relationship.

I would caution the next administration to move carefully on this front. This is not because better relations with Russia are a bad idea. To the contrary, both countries have a lot to gain from cooperation, and much to lose from conflict, rhetorical and real. However, Donald Trump will be the third of as many U.S. presidents that have begun their tenure pledging a new, more collaborative, way forward with Vladimir Putin’s Russia. There are reasons that this has repeatedly proven more difficult than it seemed.

To define policy toward Russia, it helps to consider Russia’s perspective. The Kremlin has a foreign policy explicitly centered on prestige, and it seeks to gain that prestige by “standing up” to Washington. This derives in part from a consis-
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tently zero-sum view of the world: for Moscow to be strong, it must be strong in comparison to others. The United States, which emerged from the Cold War as the world’s sole superpower, is a natural yardstick. Moreover, the Kremlin sees the United States as having prosecuted a concerted policy of punishing and weakening Russia. Today, in its view, Russia has finally grown strong enough to push back. As a result, and over the last three years especially, one of Moscow’s goals has been to demonstrate that Russia, too, can do the sorts of things the United States does (including foreign interference), and that it can keep the United States from always getting what it wants. In practice, this has meant that Russia has sought not only to advance its own, specific goals. It has also looked for opportunities to challenge U.S. policies and leadership, and to present a Cold War-like juxtaposition between the two countries. Washington, meanwhile, with its global goals and interests, has tended to notice Russian positions and concerns only when the Russians force the point. It has therefore viewed many of Russia’s policies and actions as part of a strategy of spoilerism.

Spoilerism or not, Russian actions have effects. While few doubted Moscow’s ability to wreak chaos in Ukraine, Russia’s military involvement in Syria surprised many by making a real difference: while few doubted Moscow’s ability to wreak chaos in Ukraine, Russia’s military involvement in Syria surprised many by making a real difference.

The United States takes a step back, Russia sees weakness. When it takes a step forward, Moscow sees threat.