

Trump's world order

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It would be an understatement to say that President-elect Donald Trump's views on dealing with Russia have elicited a lot of commentary and debate. Trump has stated "a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only 'stupid' people, or fools, would think that it is bad."

While there are probably very few people who want a bad relationship with Russia — stupid or otherwise — more than a few have questioned the reasoning behind Trump's apparent Russophilia, which exists even in the face of substantial evidence that Russia engaged in covert intelligence activities to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Some have suggested Trump's desire to work more closely with Russia results from gullible naïveté; others have raised the possibility of more nefarious reasons for Trump's pro-Russia tilt.

I obviously have no way of knowing for sure why Donald Trump has such a keen affinity for Russia, but I think there is a way of explaining his views.

It's clear that Trump views the world in a relatively simple, nationalistic manner. He supports a more unilateral approach to many foreign policy questions and he sees himself as a deal-maker who isn't tied to the free trade and political liberalization orthodoxy of the post-Cold War period. He's a protectionist, who seems to have particular concerns with China as an adversary of the United States, and he's willing to act on such concerns.

So it's easy to imagine that Donald Trump sees the world in terms of power centers with three major military and economic powers: the United States, Russia and China (the militarily weak European Union, especially post-Brexit, wouldn't fit in this power center definition).

The United States is the leading hegemonic power of the three and faces competition from the rising powers of Russia and China. The choices the United States has in response to this are: co-opt/form an entente with one of the rising powers, or try to play the rising powers off against one another and hope that they don't successfully join forces against the United States.

Trump is choosing the first option. It's a simple logic: Two beats one, it's better to be one of the two, and the rising power Trump thinks the United States can work with best is Russia.

When viewed in this manner, Trump's approach to Russia becomes more understandable. It's a balance-of-power approach to foreign policy, however crassly imagined and stated by the incoming president. This is a viewpoint that sees the world in terms of spheres of influence, is coldly realist and owes more to Metternich than more idealistic visions of spreading democracy or protecting human rights. As such, it's probably no accident that Henry Kissinger has met with and spoken well of Trump in recent weeks.

I'm not suggesting this is a great approach to foreign policy. It certainly lacks an ethical vision, and it doesn't concern itself with questioning how other nations in the world are governed or engage with deep ideological questions. It also shows little regard for America's existing alliances, particularly NATO. Further, Trump is gambling that Russia will work with the United States rather than try to undermine it.

Needless to say, that is a huge — and perhaps unwise — gamble.

But it is a coherent foreign policy approach that is not without precedent, especially if one assumes the conflicts between the United States, Russia and China are issues of economics and power politics rather than ideology or morality. I don't hold that view, but that view isn't unheard of or completely indefensible. And there is evidence that Trump has long supported the concept of striking a deal with the Russians, even during the Soviet era, to work together as the dominant powers in the world.

When one views Trump's rhetoric and actions with regard to Russia in this light, his rhetoric and actions become more comprehensible. It may not be advisable, but that is another story.

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