



What's the primary threat? by Ralph Cossa

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What nation or entity poses the greatest threat to the United States? Is it, as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper just stated, Russia? Or is it, as Trump himself (among many others) has proclaimed, ISIS? Is it North Korea, which is – Trump's "It won't happen" tweet notwithstanding – rapidly developing a nuclear weapon and delivery system capable of striking the United States? Or is it an increasingly assertive China, which is flexing its military muscle in the South and East China Seas and its economic muscle almost everywhere?

This is not an academic question. The answer will (or at least should) drive US security policy for the incoming Trump administration and help determine if we should try to contain or cooperate with Russia, China, and others.

Let's look at Russia first. Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "when you look at the Russians, they do pose an existential threat to the United States." The operative word here is "existential." This statement is irrefutable! Russia (like the US) possesses the nuclear weapons capability to destroy human civilization several times over. In terms of *capability*, Russia has been, is, and remains our greatest existential threat. But, overheated campaign rhetoric aside, does anyone really believe either Trump or Putin is so manically self-destructive as to push the button if/when the other bruises his ego? OK, there are some out there who probably do believe it, but get a grip! In terms of *intent*, the prospects of an all-out nuclear war with Russia remain low, hacking, Crimea, and other real and imagined Russian sins notwithstanding.

This is not to demean the threat posed by Russian hacking. Attacks against our infrastructure – electric grids, transportation hubs, etc. – could create chaos and cause considerable damage and could legitimately be interpreted as an act of war calling for a similar or asymmetrical response. Attempts to meddle in elections (a time-honored Russian tradition, albeit a tactic not exclusive to the Kremlin) are also unacceptable and must be acknowledged and guarded against, even though they do not threaten our existence or democratic way of life (again a point that others may debate).

Measured by *intent*, rather than capability or consequences, the greatest immediate threat to the US is the one posed by ISIS. But it is NOT an existential threat. ISIS sympathizers and operatives can blow up a dance hall or an airplane, or wreak havoc in an unlimited number of ways that can bring about hundreds of casualties. If, God forbid, ISIS got its hands on a nuclear weapon, there could be thousands of casualties, but it still would not threaten our existence or way of life. (Our over-reaction to this threat could cause significant

damage to our way of life, but that's another story and is on us, not them).

Again, this is not in any way meant to demean the threat caused by ISIS or other terrorist organizations. We have yet to fully recover as a nation from 9-11 and the suffering being inflicted on innocent souls by ISIS throughout the Islamic world and beyond (most notably Europe) is intolerable. Preventing another terrorist attack against the United States, by ISIS or any other group, remains a top priority, as well it should.

If (in terms of emerging capabilities, potential consequences, and stated intent) North Korea tops your list of near-term security threats to the United States and our allies – and most experts agree that Pyongyang's rapidly-approaching ability to put an operational nuclear warhead on a functioning ICBM will be a "game-changer" – then cooperation with both Russia and China seem essential to deal effectively with this potentially imminent threat. Without such cooperation, the Trump administration's options are limited (see [PacNet 87](#) for a list of those options).

More ominously, if President Trump states as policy what President-elect Trump has already tweeted about the North's ICBM capability – i.e., "It won't happen" – he will be drawing a redline that could put the US on a collision course with North Korea; this could force North Korea to the top of the threat list whether we want it there or not (which is why one should be careful about drawing redlines in the first place).

If, on the other hand, the Trump administration believes that the greatest threat to US security and Pax Americana is China's growing economic and military clout, then it will have to learn to live with a nuclear North Korea and be more forthcoming in promoting its own economic interests in the region (dare I say, including reversing its opinion on the Trans-Pacific Partnership).

Where does Russia fit in if China is seen to be the main problem? While Beijing and Moscow both claim to enjoy a "strategic partnership," when the two states get in bed together, they both sleep with one eye open. Each recognizes that its relationship with the United States is more critical than their relationship with one another and, deep down inside, little trust exists on either side. Just as Nixon/Kissinger played the China card to help keep the Soviet Union in check, Trump/Tillerson may envision using a Russia card to its advantage in countering the long-term China threat.

In reality, the real answer is "all of the above." Attempts to "reset" the Russia relationship in the past have failed, in part, because Putin needed the US as an adversary to justify his own policies. Is he now ready to fully cooperate, even if we accept as a *fait accompli*, the annexation of Crimea (which is going to remain in Russian hands whether we accept it or

not)? Or will a new detente with the Russians result in greater rather than less expansionism on Russia's part, with the threat of eventual escalation? Even as the new administration tries to quantify the potential threats it will face, it will always have to hedge against other possibilities. That's the nature of foreign policy.

This caveat aside, if the Trump administration sees ISIS as the greatest immediate threat and China as the most likely future peer competitor/enemy – and all indicators appear to be pointing in this direction – then (cautious) cooperation with Putin's Russia not only makes sense, it's essential. Let me stress that I am not endorsing this world view; I'm merely trying to second-guess and understand the president-elect's desire for closer cooperation with Russia, not recommend future strategy. Hopefully the upcoming confirmation hearings will shed some light on administration thinking (if Congress and the media ask the right questions rather than just hyperventilating over the "bromance" itself). One suspects, however, we will need to wait until after the inauguration to discern President Trump's real thinking on this issue.

Should this be the new administration's thinking, one hopes it will recognize that, like America's "partnership" with Stalin to rid the world of the threat posed by Hitler's Third Reich, we will be engaged in a "marriage of convenience" and not a true strategic partnership like we have with genuine allies, like Australia, Japan, Korea, NATO, etc. In fact, without maintaining these traditional true alliances, playing a Russia card will be a dangerous and potentially counterproductive strategy.

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