

Getting the Russian relationship right

This week Mr Trump meets Mr Putin. I want the President to be realistic about Russian behaviour and how we need to respond. It would be good if relations improve rather than a further deterioration with threats on both sides, without compromising important principles. Mr Trump may well wish to announce new practical working approaches despite the differences.

The current UK government has been at the tough end of western attitudes towards Russia, in part owing to the poisonings in Salisbury. Of course killing people with nerve agents must be condemned strongly and my heart goes out to the families affected. Our relationship with Russia is, however, a complex one. The government and NATO work in close contact with the Russian authorities when acting militarily against Isis. That makes sense, but reminds us how there are few absolutes in relations between important countries. Germany, part of NATO, has made herself very dependent on Russian gas, as Mr Trump pointed out. Events and circumstances can change, and diplomacy needs to respond. A country has a range of interests. These can require agreements with countries that have very different values and behaviours and may need to reshape old alliances. We do have friendly working relations with a number of countries with whom we have profound disagreements on human rights and government behaviours.

Russia is a dominant power in the Middle East. President Obama's decision to limit US force in the region and to stay out of much of the Syrian war has ensured growing Russian influence. President Trump has not changed this policy, though he has taken specific action over chemical weapons use. Given this development the USA, UK and other NATO allies co-operate closely with the Russian military where Russia does hold sway. and need to do so to avoid inadvertent clashes.

Russia upset the EU through its actions in Crimea. This led to sanctions and tough words. The western allies however are not going to try to prize Crimea apart from Russia by force, so at some stage there needs to be discussions about how to proceed despite this dispute. Russia would say the bulk of the people of Crimea want to be Russian, so under the doctrine of self determination it makes sense. The West says there was no internationally approved referendum to test opinion and make this decision. The EU needs to watch to see what if anything the President says on this matter, as we need to avoid a major split on the subject between the USA and the European NATO members.