

As Aleppo falls, Trump faces major test over his Russia policy

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Washington: Aleppo's fall to Syrian government forces is shaping up as the first major test of President-elect Donald Trump's desire to cooperate with Russia, whose military support has proven pivotal in Syria's civil war.

Aleppo Russian airstrikes

The death and destruction in the city is only renewing Democratic and Republican concern with Trump's possible new path.

Though Trump has been vague about his plans to address this next phase in the nearly six-year-old conflict, he's suggested closer alignment between U.S. and Russian goals could be in order. His selection Tuesday of Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who has extensive business dealings with Russia and ties to President Vladimir Putin, fueled further speculation that Trump will pursue a rapprochement with Moscow

Indeed, Trump was already trying to portray Tillerson's connections with Russia as a plus. In talking points circulated on Capitol Hill and obtained by The Associated Press, Trump's transition team said Tillerson would "work closely" with Russia on "defeating radical Islam" but would "easily challenge Russia and other countries when necessary."

"President Putin knows Mr. Tillerson means what he says," the talking points say.

A warmer relationship could alter U.S. policy on nuclear weapons, sanctions, Ukraine and innumerable other issues — but none so clearly or quickly as Syria, where President Bashar Assad's defeat of U.S.-backed rebels in Aleppo is poised to be a turning point. Assad and Russia are expected seize the moment to try to persuade the U.S. to abandon its flailing strategy of trying to prop up the rebels in their battle to oust Assad.

That decision will fall to Trump.

The president-elect has not commented or tweeted about the crisis in Aleppo and widespread fears of humanitarian disaster. Yet his previous comments on the broader conflict suggest he's more than open to a policy shift.

During the campaign, Trump asserted that defeating the Islamic State group in Syria, not Assad, must be the top priority, a position that mirrors Russia's.

"I believe we have to get ISIS. We have to worry about ISIS before we can get too much more involved," Trump said in October, using an acronym for the extremist group.

Prioritizing the fight against IS could put the U.S. in closer alignment with Russia's public position, in a Middle Eastern take on the adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." It's a point Trump appeared to make during the second presidential debate when he noted that he didn't like Assad, but added, "Assad is killing ISIS. Russia is killing ISIS."

And in his first days as the president-elect Trump suggested he might withdraw U.S. support for the various rebel groups that make up Assad's opposition, telling a newspaper that "we have no idea who these people are."

Trump's posture doesn't just buck President Barack Obama's policy, it conflicts with his party's stance, as well.

Trump's running mate, Vice President-elect Mike Pence, argued during the campaign that the U.S. should strike Assad's forces if needed to prevent devastation in Aleppo. Trump took the remarkable step of contradicting him. "I disagree," Trump said, and Pence quickly backed off the threat of military action.

Both Democratic and Republican critics say Trump's brushstroke analysis of Syria's internal conflicts paints a far rosier picture of Russia's aims than reality and even endorses some of the propaganda Assad has used to delegitimize his opponents.

"Putin is a thug, a bully and a murderer, and anybody else who describes him as anything else is lying," Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said after word emerged that Trump was picking Tillerson as his chief diplomat.

While Moscow has attacked IS at times, the U.S. and its allies say most Russian airstrikes have targeted rebel-dominated areas where IS isn't active. American officials accuse Assad of a soft approach toward IS, and even of colluding with the group in hopes of marginalizing U.S.-backed rebels.

Though the U.S. under Obama has tried to work diplomatically with Russia, Syria cease-fire deals have repeatedly collapsed, with the U.S. accusing Moscow of failing to use its influence to prevent Assad from violating them. Meanwhile, Russia's military intervention has been successful in helping Assad reclaim the upper hand, making Putin a key player in Syria's future.

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So closely aligned are Russia and Syria that it was Russia that negotiated a cease-fire to evacuate the last civilians and opposition fighters from eastern Aleppo, rebels said. The rebels had been squeezed for months into smaller and smaller areas of Aleppo. The city's status as Syria's commercial hub makes its capture a key victory for Assad.

As world leaders debate what to do next, all eyes are on Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20. Robert Ford, the former U.S. ambassador to Syria and a Middle East Institute scholar, said the horrifying images of suffering emanating from Syria would force Trump to outline a more detailed response.

"While the Trump administration may want to avoid getting into the business of regime change, it's still going to have to address what it does about grotesque violations of international humanitarian law and war crimes," said Ford. "Just saying 'we're not interested in regime change' is not a response."

Aligning with Russia would make it harder for the U.S. to corral the rebels' more strident supporters into supporting peace mediation. Assad foes like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia might become more inclined to give extremists advanced weaponry despite U.S. protestations.

Concerns that Trump may soften U.S. policy toward Russia, currently under tough U.S. sanctions over its actions in Ukraine, burgeoned during the campaign amid signs of Russian hacking of political groups. U.S. intelligence agencies now say the hacking was intended to help Trump win.

Those concerns grew louder still Tuesday when Trump tapped Tillerson for secretary of state despite his history of arguing against sanctions on Russia, which could affect Exxon's joint ventures with Russia's state oil company. In 2013, Putin awarded Tillerson the Order of Friendship in honor of his efforts to improve U.S.-Russia ties.

- AP