



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

Expanded US Sanctions Against Russia and Expulsion of US Diplomatic Staff

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Written by: Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan, Research Assistant

Edited by: Najam Rafique

“Over 1,000 employees — diplomats and technical workers — worked and continue to work today in Russia; 755 will have to stop this activity,” said Russian President Vladimir Putin while talking to state-run Rossiya 1 television on July 30, 2017.¹



The move by the Russian President came after the US Congress reached an agreement on expanded sanctions against Russia on July 29, 2017.² The newly adopted sanctions package also encompass two other countries whom the US administration has long been wanting to punish - Iran and North Korea. The sanctions against Russia are levelled against its alleged interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections and its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014.³

In response to the US sanctions against Russia, the latter sanctioned 755 US diplomatic staff and technical workers to stop working in the country. The order will come into effect on September 1, 2017.⁴

Currently, over a thousand (approximately 1100) US diplomatic staff and technical workers are working in Russia on different diplomatic premises.⁵ The expulsion of 755 American diplomatic staff members and workers would include Russian employees of the American embassy and consulates as well and would reduce the staff to 455 members, matching the Russian diplomatic staff currently working in the United States.⁶ Russia also seized two diplomatic compounds, a warehouse, and a bucolic enclave. The (about to be) expelled US embassy staff members (755) would be from the US embassy in Moscow and consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok.⁷

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/world/europe/russia-sanctions-us-diplomats-expelled.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/us/politics/congress-sanctions-russia.html>

³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/russia-expels-755-diplomats-response-sanctions-170730201720880.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/world/europe/russia-sanctions-us-diplomats-expelled.html>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-retaliation-putin-idUSKBN1AF0S5>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/world/europe/russia-sanctions-us-diplomats-expelled.html>

⁷ Ibid.

The measures taken by the Russian President are the harshest of such diplomatic moves since 1986 when the United States arrested Gennadi F. Zakharov, a physicist who was a Soviet employee of the United Nations, on espionage charges. A week later, Nicholas S. Daniloff, a correspondent for US News & World Report, was arrested in Moscow on espionage charges. That started an intense round of expulsions, with the Russians ordering the American diplomatic missions down to 251 people, the same number they had in the United States at that time. The strict quota system was abandoned under a new treaty in 1992 after the Soviet Union collapsed.⁸

Washington's response to this move, however, was rather muffled. A statement by the US State Department said that this move was totally "uncalled for" and the US is assessing the impact of this move and weighing its options for a subsequent response.⁹

The change of tone by Russia came as a surprise (not so much as Russia has been constantly warning the US over the past half year regarding the consequences of seizure of Russian diplomatic properties and adoption of stricter sanctions against Russia) since the US President Trump had been stating from the onset of his election campaign to usher in a new era of improved relations with Russia. Moscow was also hopeful for better relations due to the positive signals being sent its way by the new US President. The first face-to-face meeting between President Trump and President Putin on the sidelines of G-20 Summit in July, 2017 was being taken as a great sign for the improving US-Russia relations.

Matters took a downward slide after the imposition of expanded sanctions against Russia, President Trump's indication of signing these sanctions into law and as a response, and Moscow's expulsion order of 755 US diplomatic and working staff from Russia.

Besides the strong rebuttal and reaction by Russia against the newly adopted sanctions, uproar has been caused in the US energy companies, defense contractors, financial actors and several of its European allies as well. The US companies engaged in business with Russia are extremely apprehensive of these sanctions and have stated that these sanctions would lead to huge profit cuts and business losses. Several European leaders have expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the newly adopted and expanded sanctions, and have argued that the US should take its allies into confidence before taking any actions against Russia.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/world/europe/russia-sanctions-us-diplomats-expelled.html>

The timing of Mr. Putin's action of expelling 755 US diplomatic staff and technical workers is significant. The order came after the Congress adopted the expanded sanctions and before Mr. Trump has signed them into law. It looks like a direct message to the US Congress (whom Russia has accused of being plagued with Russo-phobia) and not President Trump. Expulsion of envoys and diplomatic staff is the least painful tactic that rival states adopt in times of crisis. It can be scaled up and down. This is an indication that Russian President still hasn't given up hope of better relations with the US. In his announcement, President Putin noted other areas in which the US and Russia can cooperate such as de-escalating war in Syria and cooperation in shared oil projects across the globe. The date of effect of the expulsion order by President Putin also suggests that Russia is willing to give the US administration generally and President Trump particularly, some time to make things right.

US and Russia needs to resolve this matter amicably through mutual consent, politically and diplomatically as the crisis among the two world powers will definitely set a wrong precedent for other states and might have adverse and long lasting impact on international affairs and world peace.