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## Issue Brief

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

# A Cold War of Words: Escalating Diplomatic Row between Washington and Moscow

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**US-Russia tensions are nothing new but the recent diplomatic row between the two has opened up a new venue of confrontation. Bilateral relations between Washington and Moscow have escalated sharply amid accusations and disagreements over several contentious issues, ranging from military operations in Syria against ISIS, confrontations in Eastern European countries, and cyber breaches.**

The recent diplomatic row between the two powers has added more fuel to fire after the US authorities seized some of Russia's diplomatic premises in the country and expelled its diplomats.<sup>1</sup> The seizure and expulsion took place after the US authorities



blamed Russia for its alleged hacking of the US Presidential elections. The two properties that were seized and closed off (to the Russian diplomats) are located in New York and Maryland and 35 Russian diplomats were declared *persona non grata* and expelled from the US.<sup>2</sup>

The act of expulsion and seizure by the American authorities (of Russian properties and diplomats) generated a strong reaction from the Russian side. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, termed this act as “outrageous” and stated that if the required steps to return Russian assets are not taken by the US, Russia will have no choice but to take retaliatory measures against the US diplomats in Russia as well. According to the Russian *Izvestia* daily, Russia was considering expelling around 30 US diplomats and taking over two US diplomatic compounds in Moscow and St Petersburg.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Obama expels 35 Russian diplomats in retaliation for US election hacking,” *Guardian*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/29/barack-obama-sanctions-russia-election-hack>.

<sup>2</sup> “Lavrov slams US seizure of Moscow's diplomatic assets as being ‘robbed in broad daylight’,” *TASS*, July 18, 2017, <http://tass.com/politics/956601>.

<sup>3</sup> “Moscow steps up war of words in diplomatic row with the US,” *Reuters*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-lavrov-idUSKBN19W15X>

Moscow has repeatedly denied the allegations levelled against it by Washington and termed it a foul play by the previous Obama administration. Lavrov stated that such an action was a deliberate attempt by the outgoing Obama administration to lay traps for the new President.<sup>4</sup>

The US, on the other hand, seems to be taking this matter rather lightly. Most of the US congressmen and senators have been avoiding commenting on the issue and the matter was also not a part of the discussion during the meeting between President Trump and President Putin, which took place on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Hamburg, according to a senior Trump administration official.<sup>5</sup> From the onset of this issue, Russia's tone with the US has been getting more and more aggressive and impatient with the passage of time but to no avail.

Russian Foreign Minister attributed such aggressive behaviour by the US to the "Russophobia" that still prevails in the US Congress and hopes that it will eventually wane.<sup>6</sup> While talking to the media on July 17, 2017, Lavrov stated that the seizure of the Russian assets and premises and the denial of access to the Russian diplomats to those properties are analogous to being 'robbed in broad day light.'<sup>7</sup>

It was believed that the recent spat over diplomatic properties might take a turn towards betterment during the expected meeting between the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov, and the US Deputy under-Secretary of State, Thomas Shannon, but the issue remains unresolved even after the meeting took place between the two officials on July 18, 2017.<sup>8</sup>

According to the US Deputy Secretary of State, John Sullivan, the seized properties are part of a larger dialogue with Russia, involving larger issues. When questioned about the seized Russian properties during hearings at the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the Deputy Secretary stated that before reaching any agreement with the Russian, the issue will be consulted upon by the Congress with the Trump administration.<sup>9</sup>

The diplomatic row over the seized Russian properties by the US is unique in nature and getting aggravated with every passing day. The situation is unprecedented - both in regard to bilateral relations

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Lavrov slams US seizure of Moscow's diplomatic assets as being 'robbed in broad daylight'."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "CNN: Senior Russian diplomat says row over seized compounds almost settled," TASS, July 18, 2017, <http://tass.com/politics/956687>.

<sup>9</sup> "Deputy Secretary of State: no final agreement reached on Russian diplomatic compounds," TASS, July 18, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/956682>.

and international law. Although the issue might not seem to be of great importance to most analysts (bilaterally) yet it might have an adverse impact at the international level. For instance, both states have entered a new phase of agreement regarding the establishment of peace in Syria (case and point, the agreement over the establishment of Safe Zones in Syria and purge against ISIS). Afghanistan is another domain which requires mutual efforts from both the states to reach an agreement over the establishment of peace and commencement of rehabilitation process in the country.

If both countries fail to reach a peaceful settlement regarding the diplomatic crisis that currently plagues their bilateral relations, chances are there that recent victories achieved against terrorism and advances made in restoring peace and stability in volatile regions (such as the Middle East and Afghanistan) will be jeopardised and the world might experience a new wave of chaos and instability. Given their power status and significance in international affairs, it is imperative for the US and Russia to solve their differences amicably because their differences can kick off yet another Cold War.