

Obama threatened war over alleged Russian election hacking

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President Obama telephoned Russian President Vladimir Putin the week before the November 8 elections, using the hot-line “red phone” that connects the White House to the Kremlin, to threaten retaliation in the event of any Russian hacking on Election Day, NBC News reported Monday night.

Citing unnamed US government officials, NBC said that after having previously resisted making a direct warning of “armed conflict” during a conversation with Putin at the G-20 economic summit in China in September, Obama decided to use the more threatening language in the call on October 31.

“This time Obama used the phrase ‘armed conflict,’” the NBC report said. “‘International law, including the law for armed conflict, applies to actions in cyberspace,’ said part of a message sent over the Red Phone on October 31, according to a senior US official. ‘We will hold Russia to those standards.’”

The “Red Phone” is no longer an actual telephone, like the one used to avert nuclear confrontations during the Cold War, so Obama did not speak directly to Putin. Instead, it sends email messages and attachments. White House officials said that it had been used after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, but that Obama had never used it before.

NBC reported, “The use of the Red Phone communicated just how serious the situation had become.” Retired Admiral James Stavridis, the former commander of NATO, told the network, “It’s a dramatic step to pick that phone up and use it.” An Obama administration official added, “There was nothing done on Election Day, so it must have worked.”

During his press conference December 16, Obama hinted at unspecified future retaliation over the alleged Russian role in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta, but he did not disclose the October 31 message to Putin or

his use of the term “armed conflict” in warning the Russian president.

The Obama administration and the US intelligence agencies still refuse to provide a shred of evidence that the Russian government was involved in the hacking of the DNC and Podesta, or that Moscow had any plans to disrupt Election Day in the United States which had to be forestalled by Obama’s threat.

This has not stopped the corporate media in the US, nor Democrats and Republicans in the US Senate, from pressing ahead with their campaign of allegations about Russian hacking and ever more ferocious demands for countermeasures against Russia, ranging from economic sanctions to acts of cyberwarfare.

Republican Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado said Monday he would introduce legislation to create a new Senate select committee on cybersecurity that would take up the allegations of Russian government hacking during the US election campaign.

His statement follows the issuance of a joint letter by four senators, two Republican and two Democrat, proposing the formation of such a select committee. Republicans John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and Lindsey Graham were joined by two leading Democrats, Minority Leader Charles Schumer and Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee.

“Recent reports of Russian interference in our election should alarm every American,” the four senators wrote Sunday in a letter to Senator Mitch McConnell, the majority leader. “Cybersecurity is the ultimate cross-jurisdictional challenge, and we must take a comprehensive approach to meet this challenge effectively.”

Schumer denied claims by the Trump transition team that the allegations of Russian hacking were an effort to forestall Trump’s victory in the Electoral College

Monday, or to delegitimize his election. “We don’t want it to just be finger pointing at one person or another,” he said. “We want to find out what the Russians are doing to our political system and what other foreign governments might do to our political system. And then figure out a way to stop it.”

The significance of Gardner’s support for McCain and Graham is that the Republicans hold only a 52-48 majority in the incoming Senate, which takes office in January. Any three Republican senators who joined forces with the Democratic minority on an issue like forming a select committee could potentially win the vote.

In an interview with Politico.com, Gardner said he would propose to broaden the scope of the cybersecurity investigation to include North Korea, Iran and other potential adversaries, in addition to Russia.

McConnell, however, has continued to reject a select committee, which would give a higher political profile to the issue, insisting that any investigation into Russian hacking would go through the Senate Intelligence Committee, which invariably meets behind closed doors and keeps its findings and conclusions secret.

The underlying issue in the political firestorm over the unproven allegations of Russian hacking has been the orientation of US foreign policy under the incoming Trump administration. Powerful sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, along with the Democratic Party and much of the Republican Party, are opposed to any shift away from the hard-line policy of confrontation with Russia in Syria, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Eastern Europe as a whole.

According to a report in *Foreign Policy* magazine Tuesday, a Pentagon memo, written December 1 by acting Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Brian McKeon, gave a four-point list of priorities set by the Trump transition team, including defeating ISIS, eliminating caps on the military budget, developing US cyberstrategy, and “finding efficiencies” in the Pentagon’s operations.

The magazine quoted a former Pentagon official saying, “People there now would be pretty concerned to see Russia not on the list,” especially given that Russia has been pronounced the number one threat to US national security by General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other top officials. The memo, whose text was published in *Foreign Policy*, mentions China and North Korea in passing, but the word “Russia” does not appear.

The media campaign against Trump continued with an

editorial in the *Washington Post* Tuesday endorsing the McCain-Schumer call for a bipartisan select committee. It argued, “every American should be deeply concerned about evidence that Russia attempted to use computer hacking, fake news stories and perhaps other methods to undermine the integrity of the U.S. campaign and, specifically, to defeat Hillary Clinton.”

The most strident comment was published Monday as an op-ed column in the *Boston Globe*, written by John Shattuck, assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, in the Clinton administration, where he was a fervent advocate of US military intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Under the headline, “Donald Trump raises specter of treason,” Shattuck wrote that Trump could be guilty of this offense, which carries the death penalty, for denying the claims of US intelligence agencies that Russia engaged in cyberwarfare against the Democratic campaign in the presidential election, in order to help Trump.

Shattuck declares: “The federal crime of treason is committed by a person ‘owing allegiance to the United States who. ... adheres to their enemies, giving them aid or comfort,’ and misprision of treason is committed by a person ‘having knowledge of the commission of any treason [who] conceals and does not disclose’ the crime. By denigrating or seeking to prevent an investigation of the Russian cyberattack Trump is giving aid or comfort to an enemy of the United States ...”

The op-ed concludes: “Trump should seek to clear the air by endorsing the proposed investigation of the Russian hacking scandal. For him to continue to deny Russia’s cyberattack and resist the investigation invites a specter of treason to hover over the president-elect.”

That a significant figure in the foreign-policy establishment should write such a screed, and that a major newspaper should publish it, testifies to the deep divisions within the US ruling elite that underlie the increasingly venomous political conflict.



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