

In Russia, reality sinks in after Flynn ouster

Andrea Peters
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The forced resignation of US National Security Adviser (NSA) Michael Flynn over accusations regarding his conversations with the Russian ambassador prior to the inauguration of US President Donald Trump has provoked new anxieties in Moscow. The Russian ruling elite is attempting to sort out the implications for itself of the conflict raging in the American political establishment over US geostrategy.

Militarily unprepared for a large-scale confrontation with the United States, and presiding over a population frightened of war and increasingly embittered over falling living standards, the Kremlin had hoped that Trump's seemingly more friendly approach would allow Moscow to shore up its precarious position.

Having been among the first leaders to personally congratulate Trump on his election, after a phone call in late January with the White House, President Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia "over the past two centuries supported America, was its ally in two world wars and now sees it as its most important partner in the struggle against international terrorism."

This marked a notable shift in the Kremlin's tone. In recent years, Putin has repeatedly criticized Washington for destabilizing the world order and seeking to undermine Russia's territorial integrity through support for pro-Islamic terrorist movements within Russia's borders.

After his election, leading Russian pundit Fyodor Lukyanov went so far as to describe Trump as "the president of our dreams." In an effort to obscure the fascistic politics of the billionaire American president—and lend a progressive gloss to similar tendencies within Russia—the pro-Kremlin, right-wing press has hailed Trump as "a right-wing socialist" who combines social conservatism with a concern for "the bottom" in society.

The enthusiasm for Trump, however, is increasingly tempered by fears that Russia will be unable to find a new *modus vivendi* with the US. This sentiment has become more pronounced after the ouster of Flynn, who among

Trump advisers, appeared to be among the most amenable to cooperation with Russia.

Officially, the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin has refused to issue a statement on Flynn's removal from office. Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov declared on Tuesday, "We do not wish in any way to comment on this internal affair of the Americans, this internal affair of the administration of President Donald Trump. This is not our business."

When pressed as to whether it was possible to understand the dynamic of Russian-American relations during Trump's tenure in office thus far, Peskov stated cautiously, "It is too early to speak of this."

While Peskov attempted to project a sense of calm over the political warfare raging in Washington, it is clear that the optimistic response of the Russian ruling elite to Trump's presidential victory is giving way to moods of caution and even pessimism.

Leonid Slutsky, a member of the Russian Duma's committee on foreign affairs, described Flynn's forced resignation as being "of a provocative character." He described it as a "negative signal" for the "Russian-American dialogue." Aleksei Pushkov, another committee member, described the situation unfolding in the US as a "witch-hunt."

A February 14 comment in *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, the official Russian government newspaper, summed up the mood spreading within the country's elite when it noted, "Flynn worked in his post for just 24 days. The impetuous and scandalous resignation of one of the key advisers [in the Trump administration] casts a shadow on the president, and without a doubt will be used by his opponents to further the anti-Russian hysteria in the internal political struggle."

Adding that one "could only guess" at what Flynn's resignation would mean for the Trump administration's relationship with Russia, it noted that the new American president was clearly not in control of the myriad agencies making up the US security services and that he was facing stiff resistance from both Democrats and "hawk-

Republicans.”

The notion that Trump’s pro-Russian policy is falling victim to a vast conspiracy involving the American intelligence community has been repeated in numerous Russian-language publications.

The leading daily *Izvestia*, carried a piece by political scientist Viktor Olevich, in which the author decried “The dangerous weakness of Trump,” arguing that the US president had crumbled beneath “massive pressure from the side of those uninterested in reforming the foreign policy course of the US.”

Flynn’s removal from office is part of the relentless anti-Russian campaign being waged by powerful sections of the American ruling class, which sees Moscow’s control over the Eurasian landmass as an intolerable obstacle to the US drive for global hegemony.

Even as Trump continues to defend Flynn and insist that his government is the victim of illegal insider leaks, tensions between the US and Russia mount.

Shortly after news broke of Flynn’s resignation, Trump spokesman Sean Spicer declared that the US president expects Russia to return Crimea, the predominantly ethnically Russian region of Ukraine absorbed by Moscow following a popular referendum after the February 2014 US-backed anti-Russian coup in Kiev.

In response, Russia’s Peskov declared that his country does not discuss matters related to its own territory with foreign powers. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated the Kremlin’s position the following day, stating, “We are not returning our territory. Crimea is the territory of the Russian Federation.”

The same day stories began circulating in the US press that a Russia spy vessel was detected off the coast of Delaware. In another development, unsourced claims emerged in the American press that Russia had deployed a land-based missile in violation of a 1987 treaty with the US. Moscow has denied these allegations.

Having recently sent a destroyer into the Black Sea, an area of key geostrategic importance for Russia, just this week the US claimed that Russian aircraft buzzed the American warship in a series of threatening aerial maneuvers. Moscow denies this.

Simultaneous to these developments, leaks have emerged about the late January phone call between Putin and Trump that undermine the positive portrayals of the exchange. According to the *Washington Post*, at some point mid-way during the call, Trump paused the discussion to ask an aide about the nuclear arms treaty, New START, negotiated with Russia under the Obama

administration. In his exchange with Putin, he then went on to denounce the deal as overly favorable to Moscow. The Kremlin has said it has nothing further to say about the conversation.

Top figures in both leading US parties adamantly oppose any lifting of the anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the US starting in 2014, with Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer preparing a bipartisan bill that would significantly limit Trump’s ability to enact any changes to the sanctions regime. Flynn was pushed out of office over allegations that he indicated to Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak that some sanctions could be lifted once Trump came into office. The Kremlin denies that the matter was discussed.

There are growing demands for an investigation into the Trump administration’s relationship with Russia, which come on top of ongoing congressional inquiries into Moscow’s supposed interference in the US elections. The new American president is essentially being accused of acting as an agent of the Kremlin.

On Wednesday, speaking before an audience of students and teachers at the country’s diplomatic academy about the situation in Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attempted to sound an optimistic note about his country’s relations with the US and its allies. He expressed confidence that “our partners”—France and Germany, as well as the United States—will “block attempts to sabotage the fulfillment of the Minsk [Accords] on the part of Kiev, whose destructive actions are deepening the intra-Ukrainian conflict.” Lavrov went on to assert that Russia was “neither an advocate of confrontation nor isolation,” with regards to the Western states.

Without any solution to the geopolitical crisis it faces, the Russian ruling elite continuously resorts to a combination of military saber-rattling and desperate appeals to Washington to shift course.

Exactly how relations between Washington and Moscow will unfold in the short term remains unclear, as the conflict within the US political establishment over policy towards Russia rages on.



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