

Investigation of White House-Russia ties expands to Trump's personal lawyer

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The internecine political warfare that has dominated Washington for months intensified Tuesday with the report that the House and Senate intelligence committees have asked President Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, to "provide information and testimony" about any contacts he had with Russian officials.

The request letters sent to Cohen, whose association with Trump predates the 2016 election campaign, were the same as those sent to former Trump aides Michael Flynn, Paul Manafort, Carter Page and Roger Stone. Flynn refused last week to comply with a subpoena issued by the Senate committee and rejected a request for information from the House.

Cohen told ABC News that he had likewise refused to cooperate with the investigations into alleged Russian interference in the election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign. The Senate committee responded by voting to give its leaders, Republican Chairman Richard Burr and ranking Democrat Mark Warner, the power to issue subpoenas whenever they think it necessary. On Tuesday, Flynn informed the committee that he was willing to release some but not all of the information it requested.

Cohen said in an email, "I declined the invitation to participate as the request was poorly phrased, overly broad and not capable of being answered." He called the investigation a "rush to judgment" and denounced the request for information as a "total fishing expedition." He added, "They have yet to produce one single piece of credible evidence that would corroborate the Russia narrative."

The refusal of Cohen and Flynn to comply with the committees' requests sets up a potential legal confrontation that could include congressional contempt citations, court rulings and the charge of

obstruction of justice on the part of Trump, an impeachable offense.

The inclusion of Cohen in the congressional investigations, which parallel an FBI probe headed by former FBI director and recently appointed special counsel Robert Mueller, expands the involvement of figures in Trump's direct political and personal periphery. Last week the focus of the campaign against Trump's supposed "softness" toward Russia shifted to Jared Kushner, his closest White House adviser and son-in-law.

The Democratic Party and much of the media are portraying meetings Kushner held with Russian officials in December, during the transition period, as illegitimate if not treasonous. Reports that Kushner proposed to Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak the establishment of a backchannel line of communication to discuss cooperation in regard to the Syrian war and other questions are being cited as evidence of an extraordinary and sinister breach of diplomatic and political norms. The backchannel was never established.

The Democratic National Committee last week demanded that Trump immediately fire Kushner and called for a criminal investigation. It demanded to know whether the request for a secret communications channel with Moscow had been authorized by Trump.

The furor over this question is a complete red herring. There is nothing extraordinary about such confidential channels being set up with foreign governments, not only by US administrations, but also by incoming presidents and even by presidential campaigns prior to elections. The real source of the conflict within the ruling class is the fact that the Trump administration favors a policy of improved relations with Russia to focus US imperialist aggression on China. This,

however, cuts across the ferociously anti-Russian policy adopted by the Obama administration and supported by large sections of the intelligence and foreign policy establishment.

The Democratic Party has completely aligned itself with the most rabidly anti-Russian factions of the state and chosen to make this question of imperialist policy the basis of its opposition to Trump. It is saying next to nothing about Trump's savage attacks on democratic rights and plans to destroy social programs upon which tens of millions of working people rely for health care, nutrition, housing assistance and other basic needs, or his frontal assault on public education. On these issues, as well as further windfalls for the rich, there is little that separates the two big-business parties.

The concocted character of the "scandal" over back channels with Russia is of a piece with the fabricated nature of the entire anti-Russian narrative. No substantive evidence has been provided either by the intelligence agencies, the Democratic Party or the media to back up the claims of Russian hacking and leaking of Democratic Party emails as part of an effort to tip the election from Hillary Clinton to Trump.

New media reports containing generally vague and unsubstantiated allegations continue to emerge almost on an hourly basis. One example is a Tuesday report by CNN of intercepted conversations among unnamed Russians, concerning unspecified "derogatory" information about Trump associates that might be used to put pressure on the Trump government.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has been making the rounds of news programs to stoke up suspicions about Trump administration dealings with Moscow. On Tuesday morning, he told CNN's Chris Cuomo that there was "overwhelming" evidence of Russian interference in the US election, but when pressed by Cuomo, refused to actually provide any. He suggested that Kushner's discussions with Russian officials might violate the "time-honored principle of one president at a time."

Interviewed later on the "PBS NewsHour" program, he said there might be a "benign" explanation for Kushner's proposal for a backchannel with Russia, but added, "One wonders if there might be something more nefarious."

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark, a Democrat who commanded NATO forces in the 1999 US-led war on

Serbia, connected the Trump-Russia investigation to the president's much criticized performance at last week's NATO and G7 summits. Interviewed Tuesday morning on CNN, he said, "People in Europe are asking why this administration is trying to make Putin happy."

In fact, the response of the European powers to the Trump visit was to shift further from the anti-Russian policy of the US, exemplified in Putin's visit with French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday. However, the Democrats are seeking to utilize Trump's European trip, which is seen as disastrous among significant sections of the ruling elite, to add fuel to their own foreign policy conflicts with the Trump administration.

There are mounting indications of crisis and disarray within the administration. On Tuesday, the White House announced Mike Dubke's resignation as communications director. This comes amid persistent reports of an imminent shakeup in the White House staff, including the possible firing or demotion of White House press secretary Sean Spicer.

Spicer held a press briefing on Tuesday, the first in two weeks, at which he refused to answer questions about the inquiry into Kushner and, in scripted remarks, hailed Trump's foreign tour as a triumph of the administration's "America First" foreign policy. In response to a question about German Chancellor Angela Merkel's sharp rebuke to Trump and call for an independent European policy, he said the relationship between Trump and the German leader was "fairly unbelievable" and insisted that they "got along very well."



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