

Special counsel, Democrats step up pressure on Trump over Russia, Assange

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The latest moves by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in the Russia investigation underscore the close coordination between the former FBI director and dominant factions of the military/intelligence establishment, which, in alliance with the Democratic Party, are using the fabricated charges of Russian "meddling" and alleged Trump campaign collusion to pressure Trump into pursuing an even more provocative and reckless policy against Russia.

This campaign is increasingly combined with an effort by Mueller to frame up WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on espionage or conspiracy charges. The aim is to force Assange from his enforced refuge at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, so that British authorities can arrest him and extradite him to the US, where he already faces federal charges that carry a possible death sentence.

This week's moves by Mueller also highlight the reactionary substance of the Democratic Party's opposition to the right-wing Trump administration.

On Thursday morning, Michael Cohen, Trump's former personal lawyer and "fixer," pled guilty in Manhattan to a charge brought by Mueller of lying to Congress. Cohen has been cooperating with Mueller's prosecutors since he pled guilty last August to violations of campaign finance laws in connection with an election-eve payoff to silence two women who claimed they had had sexual relations with the then-Republican presidential candidate. Cohen also pled guilty in August to unrelated charges of financial fraud.

In statements made to the US district judge and legal filings by the special counsel's office, Cohen admitted to lying to Congress about negotiations carried out during the 2016 election campaign between the Trump Organization and Russian officials over a Moscow Trump Tower project. Cohen said he lied to back false

statements made by Trump that the hotel project talks ended in January 2016, prior to the first Republican primary election, and that Trump had no input into the negotiations while running for president. Cohen also contradicted claims by Trump that none of his family members were involved in the talks.

Mueller's prosecutors made a point of telling the court they believed Cohen was telling the truth in connection with his plea bargain. This takes on added significance because Trump's lawyers last week submitted answers to questions from the special counsel's office, including queries relating to the negotiations over the Moscow Trump Tower proposal. This raises the possibility of obstruction of justice charges against Trump or his aides and family members based on discrepancies between their accounts to Congress or to Mueller's investigators and that of Cohen.

The surprise court filing and guilty plea were timed to coincide with Trump's departure for the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, where he was slated to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. It took place in the context of Ukraine's weekend provocation against Russia, in which the right-wing, US-backed government in Kiev sent ships into waters off Crimea claimed by Russia. This was seized on by major media outlets aligned with the CIA and the Democratic Party to demand that Trump cancel the meeting with Putin.

Thursday morning's court appearance by Cohen added fuel to this media campaign, and within hours Trump reversed himself and announced from his plane en route to Argentina that he was canceling the Putin meeting. This sequence followed last July's pattern, when, on the eve of Trump's meeting with Putin in Helsinki, Mueller filed criminal charges against 12 Russian intelligence officers in connection with Moscow's alleged Russian interference in the

presidential election in support of Trump.

That meeting, where Trump failed to give unqualified backing to US intelligence claims of Russian hacking of Democratic Party emails, triggered furious condemnations from the Democrats and media outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN, and charges by former top intelligence officials that Trump was guilty of treason.

Since then, Trump has escalated the confrontation with Russia, including by withdrawing from the US-Russia Intermediate-Range Nuclear Treaty. This, however, is not considered a sufficient demonstration of Trump's readiness to engage in full-scale diplomatic, economic and, ultimately, military war with Russia.

Leading Democrats seized on Cohen's plea bargain to step up their anti-Russia campaign and ratchet up the pressure on Trump. California Congressman Adam Schiff, who is slated to chair the intelligence committee when the new, Democratic-controlled House of Representatives takes office in January, announced that his committee would launch an investigation into Trump's business dealings abroad.

On Monday, Mueller went to court to declare that former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort had breached his plea deal agreement by lying to special counsel prosecutors, voiding the agreement and opening up Manafort to additional charges. This move appears to be linked to Mueller's increasing focus on Assange, suggesting that Manafort had refused to give testimony implicating Assange in the hacking of Democratic campaign emails.

One day later, on Tuesday, the *Guardian* newspaper published a scurrilous article making unsubstantiated claims that Manafort had secretly met on several occasions with Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy. This was proclaimed by US cable news networks CNN and MSNBC as a "bombshell" revelation that definitively implicated Assange.

Both Manafort and WikiLeaks immediately denied the allegations and threatened to take libel action against the newspaper. The *Guardian* quietly amended the original piece to make its claims somewhat less categorical, and the media subsequently dropped the allegations entirely.

For their part, the Democrats have seized on the Cohen plea filing to escalate their McCarthyite-style attacks on Russia and denunciations of Trump as a

Putin "stooge." This only underscores the fact that the Democrats' opposition to Trump, to the extent that it exists, is entirely focused on tactical disagreements over US imperialist foreign policy, with the Democratic Party attacking the militarist and semi-fascist Trump from the right on his posture toward Moscow.

When it comes to Trump's general warmongering, his massive expansion of military spending, his pro-corporate tax cuts and gutting of business regulations, and his Gestapo-like pogrom against immigrants, the Democrats are virtually silent. They have responded to their victory in the midterm elections, including the retaking of the House with a gain of 40 seats—a pale reflection of the scale of popular anger and opposition to Trump—by reelecting all of the geriatric right-wingers who have led the House Democratic caucus for more than a decade and pledging to cooperate with Trump in pushing through his reactionary domestic agenda.



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