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PUTIN WILL HELP TRUMP DEFEAT INTERNAL ENEMIES

By Vladimir Frolov, Republic.ru, July 24, 2018

(translated by East View Press)

A BATTERING RAM FOR CRUSHING THE WEST: PUTIN WILL HELP TRUMP DEFEAT INTERNAL ENEMIES

The [Russian] president's traditional address at a meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives this year did not contain any sensational initiatives. Suffice it to say that while reaffirming Russia's priority foreign policy interest – i.e., creating “the most favorable [and] safe conditions for the country's breakthrough development” – [Putin] did not task the Foreign Ministry with seeking diplomatic conditions and solutions to ensure the lifting of Western sanctions against our country. However, this is nothing new.

What was new was a passage in Vladimir Putin's address where, commenting on the results of his meeting with Donald Trump in Helsinki, he put aside his text and dwelled on the domestic political situation in the US, where “certain forces are trying to belittle [and] disavow the results of the Helsinki summit.”

“We can see that there are forces in the US that are willing to sacrifice Russia-US relations for the sake of their ambitions amid the domestic

political struggle in America. They are ready to sacrifice the interests of their businesses, which are losing multimillion-dollar contracts, losing the Russian market, [as well as] American jobs. They are ready to sacrifice the interests of their allies in Europe and the Middle East, in particular, those of the state of Israel. They are even ready to sacrifice their own security. When I spoke about these forces, you know, this absolutely does not fit into our political philosophy, because we have always been taught that those who work for the state and in the interests of society must first and foremost think about these fundamental interests and always put them above all else. But no! As we can see, there are forces in the US that are putting their narrow partisan interests above national interests.

“Our famous satirical writers once called such people ‘miserable wretches.’ This is not so in this case. They are not miserable wretches; on the contrary, they are quite powerful [and] strong people, considering that they can shove (pardon the expression) all sorts of stories that go far beyond normal logic in the faces of their citizens, millions of their citizens. Yes, they are really capable of this.

“I am not saying this to scold or commend anyone. Absolutely not. I am saying this so that we take it into account in our practical work in the American direction.”

This statement, as well as the substance and tone of Putin’s remarks at a joint press conference with Trump in Helsinki, marks the transition of Russian policy in relations with the US to a new level – a direct political alliance with Donald Trump in the struggle against his domestic enemies: in particular the Democratic Party, the nonpartisan state bureaucracy (mostly in security, intelligence and foreign policy agencies – the nonexistent “deep state”), a part of the Republican Party establishment and leading media outlets. This is not so much about election meddling (although with the stakes being so high, there are new powerful incentives for that) as about Moscow openly siding with one of the parties of the domestic political war in the US. As Dmitry Trenin correctly comments, “this is a new phenomenon, substantially expanding the concept of the hybrid war that the US and Russia have already been waging for four years.” Judging by the fact that Russian TV channels have returned to full-blown propaganda in defense of “our Trump” and personal attacks against his “enemies,” a top-level decision to that effect has been made – either right after or even during the meeting in Helsinki.

The rationale behind this decision, the calculation of its possible consequences and its goals raise questions. This is an abandonment of the post-Soviet diplomatic tradition in relations with the US that aimed to keep [Russia] equidistant from all political camps in the US, and a return to the purely Soviet practice of fighting ideological opponents and

supporting ideological allies, but on a new qualitative and technological level.

The USSR always looked for allies among American politicians. The most successful project was the 1948 presidential election campaign of Henry Wallace, former vice-president in the administration of Franklin Roosevelt (1940-1944). Wallace sympathized with Stalin, justified the gulag, and discussed his presidential nomination and the creation of the revived Progressive Party (Wallace began his career as a Republican but then joined the Democratic Party; he was dismissed from all posts by President Truman) with the NKVD station chief in Washington. Moscow did not want Truman to be reelected, while Wallace pledged to place American nuclear weapons under UN control. Meanwhile, his vice-presidential running mate (Harry Dexter White) and possible candidates for secretary of state and Treasury were subsequently exposed as Soviet intelligence agents. The brilliant operation, which relied on a covert agent intelligence network created by the NKVD in close collaboration with American Communist party leader Earl Browder (the grandfather of Bill Browder, who is currently wanted by the Russian Prosecutor General's Office), ended with Wallace's crushing election defeat (2.4% of the vote).

Afterward, the Kremlin was more cautious, but the approach remained the same. In 1968, the KGB tried to discredit ultra-hawk Republican Barry Goldwater by spreading rumors and publications about his homosexuality. Leonid Brezhnev placed his bets on Richard Nixon to the very last, refusing to believe reports from the [KGB] station in Washington that the president's political days were numbered. In 1976, Brezhnev offered Gerald Ford "to do everything possible for his reelection" (Ford wisely refused). In 1980, attempts were made to discredit Ronald Reagan as a "dangerous lunatic" and in 1984, the KGB conducted a campaign of active measures in the US under the slogan "Reagan means nuclear war" (Reagan won in 1984 in 49 states out of 50).

Then a bet was placed on Colorado Senator Gary Hart, a promising Democratic Party leader who in 1968 went on a "private visit" to the USSR and was received in the Kremlin by Mikhail Gorbachev. Hart had every chance of becoming the Democratic Party candidate in the 1988 election, and in his foreign policy statements he advocated a "constructive relationship with the USSR" and arms control. His career quickly came to an end in 1987 over media allegations of an extramarital affair.

In the post-Soviet period, Russian foreign policy and intelligence agencies did not engage in such exploits. In 2000, Vladimir Putin did not seek to actively develop relations with vice-president Albert Gore and waited for the outcome of a rather heated election campaign in which the US Constitutional Court's decision handed the victory to George W. Bush. In

2004, Putin modestly but publicly wished Bush “election success,” revealing his personal predilections but nothing more. It must be said that during the Bill Clinton administration in 1993-1996, the Americans were more involved in Russian affairs, including the 1996 presidential election, as part of the strategic “alliance with Russian reforms” that Clinton announced during the 1992 campaign.

In the case of Trump, who is armed with today’s most powerful political weapon – i.e., presidential Twitter – Moscow has an opportunity to “hack the American system from within” if it plays its cards right. Trump’s value is not that he is willing to make a “big geopolitical deal” with Moscow, satisfying all its desires and demands (even though Trump says that he wants a deal, he does not have the slightest idea of what that should be, nor does he have the ability to implement such a deal), but that he fully accepts, shares and actively promotes on his Twitter account the Kremlin’s post-2014 key foreign policy narratives that exist in a parallel reality. In addition, by personalizing interstate relations to the fullest possible extent, Trump is indicating to Putin that Russia’s relations with the US will almost entirely hinge on whether Putin becomes “Trump’s friend” (“He’s not my enemy, he’s a competitor. I hope we get along well,” Trump said.) This opens a big window of opportunity for the Russian leader.

The main takeaway for Moscow is the chance to exert long-term influence on the formulation of US foreign policy based on the “ideological proximity” of Trump’s and Putin’s approaches toward establishing a “neo-Westphalian” world order – one based on situational alliances and deals between sovereign great powers without any connection to abstract “values and principles,” where “international law” is not about institutions but agreements between strong leaders. This is a path toward destroying “the collective West that is trying to contain Russia.” This “ideological proximity” of views is most likely accidental, but the rejection of these narratives by the US political establishment, Trump’s isolation within the American elite, and his natural inclination to spite the consensus that is being imposed [on him] (even if that means doing stupid things) give Putin a unique opportunity to personally influence the American president’s views and positions within the framework of “viewpoints approved by the Russian Security Council.” Being able to steer the opponent’s actions in the right direction under the guise of friendship and cooperation is a dream come true for any professional intelligence agent. However, the risks of such a special operation are also extremely high.

The main risk is that presidential elections in the US are still an “electoral event” without a predetermined result (in Congressional elections, on the contrary, the percentage of votes for incumbents is high, sometimes for

decades). Trump could still lose in 2020, even though today his chances of victory look as good as his predecessors': Some 45% of Americans approve of Trump's job performance (compared to 36% a year ago). Halfway through their first terms, the approval ratings of Obama, Bush and even Reagan were at approximately the same level. The reason for that is a fairly strong economic situation in the US and record-low unemployment (50% approve of Trump's economic policy), including among African-Americans and Latinos (not the case under Obama), which could undermine support for the Democrats in these key electoral groups.

Trump's off-the-charts support among Republicans (80%), which is due to policies that are overall in line with those of other Republican presidents, should not mislead anyone: Registered Republicans make up 25% of US voters; the rest have to be drawn from among independents and Democrats, with whom Trump remains rather unpopular. Only 51% of Republicans support Trump's Russia policy (which is fairly low), while 80% of Democrats and 60% of independents disapprove of it.

Trump remains the president of the minority, which he became in 2016, when he lost the popular vote but won the electoral votes in the required number of states. A repetition of such an electoral pattern in 2020 is possible but not very likely: This kind of situation in the US has happened only four times (the first time in 2000, when Bush Jr. won).

At the same time, the risk of Trump losing control of Congress in the November midterm elections remains fairly high. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats need to gain 24 seats, which is fairly realistic. In the Senate, the Republicans are likely to retain their majority by one or two seats. If the Democrats get control of the House of Representatives, it would paralyze Trump's presidency through 2020; all the president's initiatives would be blocked, with endless investigations into his previous actions, more or less as the Republicans did with regard to Obama after his victory in 2010. Impeachment, however, is impossible due to Republican control of the Senate.

In this regard, Trump's invitation for Putin to visit Washington this fall (the decision was made spontaneously, without proper consideration by advisers) looks like the American president's intention to get Putin, as his sole ally, to jump into the fray in the struggle against enemies. If the visit takes place before the Nov. 6 midterm elections, it will be a factor of direct interference (with the accompanying mass protests). If it takes place after the elections and if the Democrats regain control of the House of Representative, the media landscape during the visit will feature exposés and Congressional investigations into the actions of Trump and his team. And on top of that, a report by Special Counsel Mueller on the

investigation into Russian interference is expected in October. It would be better to invite Trump to Moscow for the May 9.

Russia's meddling in the 2016 US election and Moscow's direct involvement in a political war in the US after Helsinki as part of "a united front with Trump and his loyal voters" (among whom the prevailing "patriotic opinion" is that Russian election interference was justified because Hillary Clinton did not win) practically guarantees that if Trump loses the election, Russian-American relations will sink to new lows – again and again. "Acts of retribution" should be expected. After Helsinki and Trump's tweets to the effect that he managed to get along well with Putin, and amid his insults against American intelligence agencies and his reluctance to share information about the agreements with Putin with his administration, we are already seeing calls in the US Senate for new sanctions against Russia – far more unpleasant ones than the notorious Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

But perhaps Putin's goal is not to improve Russian-American relations – maybe that is nothing more than rhetoric. The goal is to further weaken the US and American foreign policy positions by escalating the domestic political death match between Trump and his enemies (in particular within the US state apparatus); paralyzing America's foreign policy [and] deepening disagreements and conflicts between the US and its allies. These are understandable and even legitimate goals. The only question is whether their attainment will benefit Russia.

It is possible, as some American experts believe, that even back in 2016, Putin understood that electoral interference would bury Russian-American relations, and he went ahead with it anyway (I consider this unlikely). Today, in its relations with the US, Moscow is pursuing a completely negative agenda, deliberately stepping up confrontation and threatening a military escalation, resorting mainly to propaganda (naturally, the Kremlin does not want a war with the US) as a way of "raising the stakes" for America's foreign policy. This is an attempt to force the US into a dialogue with Russia on Russia's terms and to accept Russian demands. From this perspective, the decision to "put up a united front with Trump" looks like a covert operation; a cover-up for pursuing a hostile policy. How else to explain the obvious hypocrisy of Moscow struggling against the forces in the US that are actually striving to "protect sovereignty" and "counter foreign interference in domestic affairs" – the values that Vladimir Putin has been upholding for 18 years as the leader of Russia. In this case Trump looks instrumental – like a battering ram for crushing the West, and the only objective is to ensure that he remains in the White House as Vladimir Putin's partner until 2024. As for what will happen after that, that's someone else's problem.

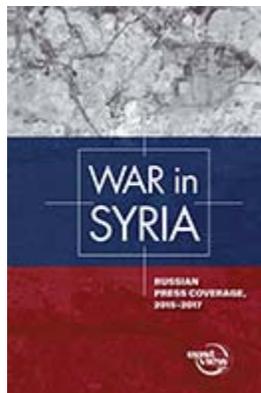
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