

# Behind the Russia-Hack Allegations

Though no public evidence has yet been provided, it's now conventional wisdom that Russia interfered in the U.S. presidential election, a dangerous moment in U.S.-Russia relations, explains ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

I cannot recall a period in which the U.S. public debate across the media has reached such implacably partisan and toxic proportions. The issues are indeed important – particularly the specific allegation of Russian involvement in helping make public the activities of the Democratic National Committee – information that was strongly unfavorable to the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton.

It is imperative that such Russian actions be thoroughly investigated and aired publicly by responsible authority as soon as possible. To date such information has not been forthcoming.

Worse, however, is that such information war – while venerable in the history of intelligence organizations – now has achieved greater clout with the advent of electronic media and Internet.

As a former CIA operations officer I can well remember routinely helping promote anti-Soviet material, usually veering towards disinformation or “false news,” to be played in various overseas media to weaken the Soviet image and position. The Soviets were spreading similar disinformation about the U.S.

But a traditional game is getting ever more dangerous now, and new rules of the road have yet to be written. Broad investigation of the doings of Russia, China and indeed the U.S. itself needs to be aired as a foundation for reaching some potential agreement on what states may or may not do in interfering in whatever way in foreign affairs and elections. Indeed, as the article I reproduce below points out, “legal” efforts by foreign countries to tilt American elections have been in place for a long time, including from foreign “friends.”

But it's not like Russia can simply throw stuff out on the table and the damage is done. We also need to perceive the diverse agendas at work here, the co-actors in the heated rhetoric issuing from among various U.S. groups on the Russian issue.

## **The Political Motive**

First, harping on the alleged Russian role in publicizing the backroom

activities of the DNC is designed to distract attention from the actual content of that DNC activity which aimed (successfully) at denigrating and weakening the candidacy of Bernie Sanders; all of that now conveniently shoved under the rug. Yet it mattered heavily to our democracy.

Second, it represents a drive to delegitimize the victory of Donald Trump. Now Trump is a figure about whose presidency I feel the deepest forebodings. But delegitimization of now-elected officials is in the longer run even more unhealthy to the political health of the Republic, yet it seems now to be part of the new U.S. politics since President Obama took office. (Obama also was subjected to efforts at delegitimization, including bogus claims that he was born in Kenya, a charge popularized ironically by Donald Trump). Opposition yes, delegitimization no.

Third, the Russian theme represents from the conservative and neocon side a desire to undercut any effort by Trump to improve relations with Russia; the anti-Putin cabal is deeply tied into the roots of the Cold War. An improvement of relations with Russia is furthermore very bad news for the military industrial complex and all its outlying organizations and consultants in and out of government.

Any improvement of relations with Russia also undercuts those who still yearn for "U.S. leadership" against global enemies – with Russia and China at the top of the list. These are the people who view international relations as a zero-sum game; whatever benefits China or Russia is automatically and by definition a setback for the U.S. Everything is win-lose, never a possible win-win game.

At this point I am delighted to turn over the rest of this blog to offer a highly balanced and insightful commentary on all these issues by Ambassador Robert E. Hunter. Hunter says it as well or better than I could; his piece is required reading in the midst of so much herd mentality in the national press.

Hunter offers a wise and sober commentary on the toxic state of politics in Washington today. He also reminds us of many of the core realities of international relations that we often forget. Equally importantly, he writes as a solidly establishment figure in U.S. foreign affairs and defense circles: Robert E. Hunter is a former senior National Security Council official and was U.S. Ambassador to NATO in the Bill Clinton administration.

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## *Rex Tillerson and the Russian Problem*

by Robert E. Hunter

*Lobelog*, December 16, 2016

Washington, DC, our nation's capital and the center of governmental angst in fair times and foul, is going through its most profound trauma in years, a collective PTSD. For most of Washington's political class, even on the Republican side of the aisle that divides the city, "this wasn't supposed to happen."

Hillary Clinton was to be president and Donald Trump an also-ran, a showman who provided entertainment, though all-too-often holding up a mirror to the foibles and hypocrisies of those who do politics for a living.

But here we are.

At least three major institutions have been given an unprecedented shaking: the pollsters, who believe that their computer-driven Ouija boards can be dignified by a formal name—psephology; the Mainstream Media that (with few exceptions) worked assiduously to defeat Donald Trump, after first having raked in the big bucks by promoting him when they thought he was just a second-rate Elmer Gantry; and the foreign policy establishment, most of whose members will now be excluded from power and influence, deprived of their God-given right to set the nation's agenda abroad and determine its directions.

The turmoil in these three institutions (and there are others) is so profound that more than a month after the election provided a definitive outcome – by the rule-book that every political animal knows by heart and follows assiduously, even when believing that the Electoral College "are an ass" – efforts are still underway to reverse Nov. 8's outcome.

A truly minor candidate asked for and got recounts in three key Trump states – Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania – which, if Mrs. Clinton were judged the victor in all three, would have made her president. This maneuver came up empty.

The latest ploy is an effort by several Electors to ask that they play their constitutional role as actual deliberators. Striking, however, is that all but one of the many signatories to this plea come from states that Hillary Clinton won. But to be relevant, at least 37 additional Electors from states that Trump carried would have to play this game. ...

**Russia and the Election**

Each of these points is worth a major article or even a book. But here I will confine myself to the state of play as it relates to foreign policy and national security. There are two primary but interlocking activities underway: one is to reduce the legitimacy of Trump's victory, perhaps hoping that this will make him more responsive to views of the Disappointed and Dispossessed after he becomes president; the other is to reduce his latitude for action in at least one major area of foreign policy.

The focus of these efforts can be summarized in one word: Russia. For months, there have been reports, some even endorsed by leaders of the U.S. Intelligence Community, first, that Russia has been trying to show that American democracy is corrupt and not worthy of emulation; and, second, that Moscow has been using advanced cyber tools both to sow confusion in America and actually to sway votes.

The clear implication is that Trump won the 2016 presidential election because Russia's Vladimir Putin interfered, directly and indirectly, in the U.S. electoral process. He was, in this view, violating unwritten rules of how major states are supposed to conduct their struggles for power and influence (latter-day Marquis of Queensbury Rules, which were indeed devised and largely followed during the Cold War, when the consequences of not doing so could have been a nuclear conflict).

Make no mistake: this matter is serious. At the extreme, it could even produce a U.S. constitutional crisis without precedent. It turns on the presumption that the Russian impact on the U.S. electoral process was large enough in key swing states to determine the outcome (or at least to leave the validity of the outcome in doubt.) Maybe so, but highly doubtful.

Yet the idea has attained widespread currency, including White House allegations of Mr. Putin's direct engagement. The full case has been laid out in a five-page article, beginning in the middle of Page One, in the December 14 *New York Times*. Its bottom line is summarized as follows:

"Did he [Putin] seek to mar the brand of American democracy, to forestall anti-Russian activism for both Russians and their neighbors? Or to weaken the next American president, since presumably Mr. Putin had no reason to doubt American forecasts that Mrs. Clinton would win easily? Or was it, as the C.I.A. concluded last month, a deliberate attempt to elect Mr. Trump?

In fact, the Russian hack-and-dox scheme accomplished all three goals."

It would be difficult to be more definitive than that!

Certainly, given the seriousness of the charges, Congressional hearings

(endorsed by leaders of both political parties) are appropriate, as is President Barack Obama's call for a root-and branch investigation. The key question is why he took so long to act, and why he is asking for a report only before he leaves office (January 20)...

### **"They All Do It"**

Anyone with experience in international politics or historical knowledge knows that interfering in other countries' politics and even elections is SOP—standard operating procedure. Others regularly do it to us: legally through their embassies, tolerated through K Street lobbyists they employ to the tune of millions of dollars, and also through their expatriates or others who convince themselves that the interests of foreign government X are also in the best interests of the United States.

In the early 20th century, Americans of Irish and Italian descent used to be masters of this game. In the 1930s, until discredited by Adolf Hitler's actions, many German-Americans joined the German American *Bund*, which tried to keep the United States out of the Second World War. American citizens, misled by foreign propaganda and arguments that the United States had "lost China," revered Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and kept the United States from normalizing relations with the People's Republic of China from 1949 until "Nixon's visit to China" in 1971. And the Israel lobby actively seeks to influence U.S. Middle East policy. This was evidenced most clearly by congressional cheering for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before a joint session of Congress, when, in speaking of Iran's nuclear program, he asked its members to trust his judgment rather than that of the U.S. president.

At the same time, the United States has regularly interfered in the politics and elections of other states, notably during the Cold War, and it still does now. People in both political parties argue that it is in a "good cause" or at least in a "necessary cause." Perhaps at times they are right.

The *New York Times* exposé, cited above, elides over one event, when it scolds Russia for "outing" a phone call between the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, as they were trying to affect the outcome of Ukraine's political struggle. According to the *Times*: "Ms. [Victoria] Nuland [the assistant secretary] was heard describing a little-known American effort to broker a deal in Ukraine, then in political turmoil."

In this case, "broker a deal" is a euphemism for "promote a *coup d'état*." Maybe that was the right course (though I do not agree), and it certainly did not justify the Russian military intervention in Ukraine that followed; but it was

not as though we were the impeccable “good guys,” just trying to promote democracy, to Putin’s demonstrable “bad guy.”

### **The Tillerson Nomination and Russia**

Now, from the wings, enters Mr. Trump’s nominee to be Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, Chairman and CEO of ExxonMobil. With all the media coverage, it is not necessary here to recount all the potential problems there might be with this choice in the one place that matters, legally if not politically: the U.S. Senate.

Suffice it to recall that Mr. Tillerson’s company has massive business dealings in the Russian Federation, some of which he negotiated personally, that he is on record as having opposed sanctions imposed when Mr. Putin seized Crimea, and that he has had a long-standing relationship with the Russian president. This includes his having received a decoration, though not one on a par with the old Soviet honor of “Hero of the Soviet Union.”

Mr. Tillerson’s activities in industry are thus sufficient to raise questions about whether he would be an effective steward of American interests rather than being compromised, in fact as opposed to perception – the Caesar’s Wife of political combat, even when invoked by people whose own “skirts are not clean.” Perhaps he would be so inclined as Secretary of State, but given his experience and reputation, it is hard for an outsider like me (who has never met him) to conclude that he would sell out U.S. interests because of a supposed “friendship” with Putin or a mess of pottage for ExxonMobil.

Mr. Tillerson has certainly displayed none of the traits of deep ideological bias that mark another of Mr. Trump’s senior national security selections, LTG Michael Flynn, who, while reportedly inclined to support a new approach in U.S. dealings with Russia, has repeatedly made statements and written a book about Iran and Islam that raise profound doubts about his fitness to be National Security Advisor.

Further, Mr. Tillerson’s nomination elides into the other question that is most pertinent, now: the allegations of Russian meddling in our election campaign, whether accurately portrayed or inflated in their impact (which can never be truly assessed). At one level, Mr. Tillerson is a stand-in for Mr. Trump, who has spoken so often of wanting to create a more positive relationship with Russia and Mr. Putin.

What that would in fact mean is anyone’s guess – most likely Trump himself does not yet know. There is some risk that, in seeking both to “reach a deal” and to be different (and more effective) that President Obama, President Trump might

compromise objectively-important interests – both America's and others'. But it is easier for opponents of any change in U.S. policy toward Russia to challenge a nominee for a cabinet post than to take on the president, while sending the same "message."

This debate comes at a difficult time in relations between the United States, along with several European states, and the Russian Federation, where "difficult" is defined not just in terms of some profound differences of interest and the facts of Russian aggression in Ukraine and intimidation of other European countries.

"Difficult" also means that in both Russia and the United States there has been a steady rise of attitudes that are redolent of the Cold War. People in both countries who should know better have been invoking the existence and even potential role of nuclear weapons; Russia has characterized NATO as its enemy; and some top U.S. military leaders have argued that Russia is an "existential threat" to the United States – a view, given that "existential" means "ready and perhaps willing to destroy us," that is both absurd and as dangerous as some rhetoric by Russia.

The wheel thus comes full circle: allegations of Russian interference in the U.S. election campaign become a tool to limit, if not cripple, President Trump's attempts to change the downward course of U.S. and Western relations with Russia.

Of course, what calculations Putin is making are unknowable, but we do know one thing: he is playing a weak hand. Russia is not the Soviet Union. Its economy was struggling even before imposition of sanctions. Its principal source of wealth and export earnings, hydrocarbons, is not worth what it was even a couple of years ago, and oil is unlikely, at least anytime soon, again to reach \$100 or more a barrel. The Russian population is aging and, while its decline in numbers may have been arrested, the population is certainly not growing significantly.

The Russian Federation is also socially fractured. Notably, Russia has one of the world's largest Muslim populations, a major part of which is disaffected from ethnic Russian domination. Thus, it is no wonder that Moscow has cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan and regarding the nuclear deal with Iran.

Unfortunately for Rex Tillerson, these factors will come together in his Senate confirmation hearings and will distract from due consideration whether he is qualified to do the job in terms that are truly relevant. His task before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will not be easy, given that so much extraneous material – he surely had nothing to do with Russian hacking – will be introduced. His background will work against him, both as portrayed by much of

the mainstream media, which already have him in their sights, and among any senators who choose to grandstand.

But if because of Russian matters he is defeated for confirmation or must ask that his nomination be withdrawn, the implications will go far beyond the issues being debated. The new U.S. president could find himself crippled in trying to work out the kind of relationship with Russia that President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry would have liked to achieve but could not – in major part because of Russian behavior, but also because of hardening attitudes here, including old Cold War overtones, that exist far more in the foreign policy establishment than in the country at large.

If that is what happens, we in the United States stand to be big-time losers.

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