

Donald Trump at a Lonely Crossroads

Battered for months by Russia-gate innuendo, Donald Trump finds his unlikely presidency at a dangerous crossroads with no clear-cut path ahead, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It is time to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect. It is very clear that Trump's Presidency is at a crossroads. This is not because there is any evidence of any wrongdoing. To date, there is a torrent of innuendo, but zero "evidence." Rather, events have converged at a point of inflection, not because the President might be impeached – that is improbable because the bar in terms of evidence, and of Congressional votes required, is very high – but because recent days have unmasked the sheer breadth and visceral animosity of the forces determined to "take down" the President, by whatever means present themselves.

President Trump faces a mainstream media (MSM) that has become hysterical in perceiving collusion with Russia everywhere – even to the extent of querying how Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Ambassador, and a Russian photographer could have been allowed access to the Oval Office, thereby compromising American "security." Trump faces a coalition of Clintonites, "corporate" Republicans, neocons, and more significantly, a fifth column within the intelligence services which regards any attempt at détente with Russia to constitute *prima facie* treason.

In response to a question from Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who asked FBI Director James Comey in the Senate Judiciary Committee "what kind of threat" Russia presents "to the democratic process" (that is to say Graham's question was not about Russia's military capabilities, but on the threat to Western democracies), Comey answered: "Certainly, in my view, the greatest threat of any nation on Earth, given their [Russia's] intention and their capability."

One might reasonably conclude then, that Trump inevitably will be overwhelmed by this onslaught. Certainly the noise from the East Coast media bubble is overwhelming. And that, precisely, is the threat to the President: the drip, drip, of innuendo that Professor Stephen Cohen has dubbed "the accusation of treason."

"And", Cohen added, "we have a whole array of allegations that Putin helped him [Trump] get in the White House – to his [Trump's] associates doing wrong things with Russians ... This, [the allegations lacking any solid evidence] is beyond belief now ... This has become a national security threat to us, in and

of, itself.”

A Paralyzed Administration

And now a Special Prosecutor has been appointed. One commentator summed it up thus: “That’s how special prosecutors work ... they hobble the president, drain away his political credibility, separate him from his supporters, and paralyze his administration. No legislator is willing to lend his support for fear of what the prosecutor might find. Each one will run for cover rather than work with Trump to get something done. In appointing a prosecutor, [Deputy Attorney General Rod] Rosenstein has killed this Administration’s ability to function. No health care overhaul. No tax cuts. No government reform. All while we await the results of a nothing investigation into a nothing scandal.”

The noise is overwhelming, but it is nearly all emanating from the coastal élites who inevitably speak the loudest. Polls may say that Trump’s favorability rating is slipping. That is so; but the polls also speak to the growing polarity between the Republican base, and the coastal Establishment: 81 percent of Clinton voters support impeaching the President, but 83 percent of Trump voters adamantly oppose it. Equally 91 percent of Clinton supporters “disapprove” of Trump, whereas 86 percent of the Trump base “support” him. There is evidence that the “deplorables” have been deeply angered by the impeachment talk.

And here lies the “inflection point”: President Trump’s base is pretty clear in identifying the “game plan” (it is widely dissected on the New Right, and Alt Right sites): The onslaught is not about finding the “evidence” (which probably doesn’t exist): The “Russian interference” meme emerged primarily from the Democratic National Committee email leaks that were originally attributed to a Russian “hack” (rather than a “leak” by Seth Rich, since murdered), via a private company, Crowd Strike, (evidence that experts now contest); from the discredited “dirty dossier” of ex-British spy Christopher Steele; and from unmasked intercepts of Trump aides (which have as yet shown no evidence of electoral collusion).

It is rather the drip, drip of innuendo which is intended – the Trump base avers – to collapse the President’s ratings (among his base) to the point at which even the Republican members of Congress will abandon the President, and join the “movement” to remove him, via one or other of the provisions of the U.S. Constitution.

Obstruction of Justice is unlikely to serve: As George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley has said, former FBI Director James Comey’s memo offers “no proof for impeachment” of Trump. Turley noted: “Indeed, it raises as many questions for Comey as it does Trump in terms of the alleged underlying

conduct.

“A good place to start would be with the federal law, specifically 18 U.S.C. 1503. The criminal code demands more than what Comey reportedly describes in his memo. There are dozens of different variations of obstruction charges ranging from threatening witnesses to influencing jurors. None would fit this case. That leaves the omnibus provision on attempts to interfere with the ‘due administration of justice.’

“However, that still leaves the need to show that the effort was to influence ‘corruptly’ when Trump could say that he did little but express concern for a longtime associate. The term ‘corruptly’ is actually defined differently under the various obstruction provisions, but it often involves a showing that someone acted ‘with the intent to secure an unlawful benefit for oneself or another.’ Encouraging leniency or advocating for an associate is improper but not necessarily seeking an unlawful benefit for him.”

What the point of inflection calls for (Trump’s supporters’ say), is to insist that the FBI investigation be concluded expeditiously, and that a counter-attack on the leaders of those forces (whomsoever they are), and on their “moles” – “embedded insurgents committed to forcing Trump from office” – who are leaking innuendo to the MSM, be prosecuted.

It is a crossroads. Trump has to halt the drumbeat, or see his Presidency crumble into dust. And the blade of “defamation politics” can be two-edged: Hillary Clinton was no paragon of virtue.

An Elusive Achievement

In this context, Trump now needs a policy achievement more than ever. A legislative success in the domestic arena is – evidently – not in prospect, but rather the political convulsions in D.C. may finally spook a somnolent and supine Wall Street to think about risk again (VIX, a litmus of market volatility, has been at historic lows) – especially as market insiders are warning their clients “not to expect to [be] bailed out by the Fed this time.” Indeed the entire Trump reflation program looks as if will be a long time coming (if it comes at all, this year).

At such times, foreign policy may come to the fore. We have already noted that the Astana Process has witnessed a White House, more ready than Obama’s, to work with Russia, Turkey and Iran, to reach some sort of settlement in Syria. The triumph of the “defeat” of ISIS in Raqa’a and Mosul might constitute just such an achievement to rally Trump’s base.

Trump was politically courageous in inviting Lavrov into the Oval Office (at a

time when “the drumbeat” of Russia collusion was reaching a crescendo). It seems that Russia and its allies are ready to concede to Trump the taking of Raqa’a, (the Syrian Foreign Minister has effectively acknowledged this); and in return, Russia and Iran have been put on test by the White House.

The hostile rhetoric from Washington on Iran, has been notably absent since Astana, and the secondary sanctions waiver in connection with the JCPOA (the nuclear agreement) has been renewed. It seems Trump has realized that Generals James Mattis (Defense Secretary) and H.R. McMaster (National Security Adviser) were intent on leading the President back into a series of (unwinnable) wars – at least that seems to be the message of Astana which has put two negotiators, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson firmly in the driver’s seat.

But here too, the onslaught on the President, and on the Astana political process is likely to continue. Recall that President Obama, who was ever more hesitant than Trump – (never fully endorsing) Secretary of State John Kerry’s and FM Lavrov’s negotiating marathons – witnessed those political efforts sabotaged by his own Pentagon (the “accident” at Dier Azor, killing 68 Syrian Army soldiers defending their besieged base against ISIS militants), and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s public equivocation about sharing intelligence on ISIS and al-Qae’da with the Russians).

Already the signs of similar sabotage are present: i.e. the Acting Assistant Secretary of State Stuart Jones’s dubious announcement – on the eve of a Geneva round of Syria talks – that the U.S. had found evidence of a crematorium at a Syrian prison, in which the remains of mass executions of prisoners were burned. Two days later Jones resigned from the State Department, with a colleague noting that while Jones was retiring early for personal reasons, his departure was a case of “another senior government official with real competence leaving.” (Or, in other words another anti-Trump dissident leaving the ship.)

Even Anne Barnard of the *New York Times* noted that the timing of the crematorium allegations seemed “political.” Yes, indeed political, but directed at the Russians or at Trump? There are also reports that a contingent of U.S. and British Special Forces are operating in southern Syria to stymie any Syrian army or Hezbollah advance in order to regain control of the Syrian-Iraqi border. On Thursday, a U.S.-led airstrike hit Syrian military forces that were deemed too close to the U.S.-British base.

So President Trump should beware. Peace settlements require huge efforts to assemble, but can be undone in a moment. And Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman should note: Trump just might be more interested in defeating ISIS at this moment, than suffering a further Saudi lecture on the

misdeeds of Iran. Though President Trump will be happy to receive whatever boodle with which the Saudis may care to shower him. Rumors say up to \$300 billion – \$400 billion in arms deals! “Quite nice,” as the Donald might say.

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