

Playing Politics with the World's Future

The strategy of neutering President Trump in his dealings with Russia – and his administration's own ignorance about complex Mideast issues – are combining to create grave dangers, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Finally ... the U.S. Congress has produced a piece of legislation. And it passed with quasi-unanimous, bi-partisan support. Only its substance is not so much a deep reflection on the foreign policy interests of America, but rather, the desire to hurt, and incapacitate the U.S. President in any future dealings with Russia. (And never mind the worrying impulse towards conflict with Russia this entails, or its collateral damage on others).

The aim has been to see President Trump hog-tied, and “tarred and feathered” for his “risky behavior” on Russia. This aim simply has overpowered any other considerations – such as likelihood that the outside world will conclude that America's ability to pursue or even to have a foreign policy is non-existent in the face of its internal civil war. It is a key juncture. For an overwhelming majority of Democratic and Republican Senators and Congressmen, bringing down “The Donald” is all – and the devil take the consequences for America, in the world.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-California, blandly stated that the concerns of U.S. allies come second to the need to punish Russia for its election interference. When asked whether the bill took account of European Union's interests, one of the main authors, Senator John McCain, R-Arizona, said simply: “Not that I know of. Certainly not in the portion of the bill I was responsible for.”

Another of the bill's author, Bob Menendez, D-New Jersey, laconically replied to the same question: “Not much, to be honest with you.”

McCain carelessly then quipped that essentially that it was “the job of the E.U. to come around to the legislation, not for the legislation to be brought around to them.”

The U.S. President had little option but to sign the legislation, but that does not mean that diplomacy is completely blocked. As expected, he issued a Signing Statement (see here), in which, while accepting the mandate of Congress, Trump took issue with the new Congressional encroachments into his prerogatives (Article Two of the Constitution) in terms of foreign policy, and he reserved the right to decide on how the Congressional mandate might be implemented (i.e.

in respect to the quadrilateral negotiations over Ukraine). He has some wriggle room, especially in terms of how the legislation is enforced (or not, as the case might be), but certainly not enough wriggle room to mollify Europe – or, more pertinently, to persuade Russia that America now has anything, substantive to offer; or were it offered, able to be delivered. In other words, for Russia, the U.S., effectively, is severely agreement-incapacitated.

Medvedev's Assessment

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote in response:

“The signing of new sanctions against Russia into law by the U.S. president leads to several consequences. First, any hope of improving our relations with the new U.S. administration is over. Second, the U.S. just declared a full-scale trade war on Russia. Third, the Trump administration demonstrated it is utterly powerless, and in the most humiliating manner, transferred executive powers to Congress. This shifts the alignment of forces in U.S. political circles.

“What does this mean for the U.S.? The American establishment completely outplayed Trump. The President is not happy with the new sanctions, but he could not avoid signing the new law. The purpose of the new sanctions was to put Trump in his place. Their ultimate goal is to remove Trump from power.” (Emphasis added).

The key new provision in law is dubbed *The Russia Sanctions Review Act of 2017*. It codifies into law past sanctions on Russia imposed by previous Administrations, and prohibits the President from lifting any existing sanction against Russia without the prior permission of Congress. The law states that the process of securing such consent requires that the President send to Congress a (prior) report stating and arguing the presumed benefit that would accrue to the U.S. through the lifting of any sanction. The Congress then may institute hearings on the President's report, and on the merit of his argument about the potential quid pro quo – justifying his proposed action. In the light of these hearings, Congress may then consider a resolution of approval or disapproval (within 30 days of receiving the President's statement).

The influential *Lawfare* site points out, however, that “the provision is drafted quite broadly to cover actions *that have any ameliorative effect* despite falling short of formally lifting sanctions. For example, congressional review is required for a waiver, “a licensing action that significantly alters United States' foreign policy with regard to the Russian Federation,” and any action which would allow Russia to regain access to properties in Maryland and New York” (Emphasis added).

In short, Congress gave itself a 30-day review period to vote down any changes Trump tries to make in terms of America's foreign relations with Russia.

Offending Europe

These are the teeth, but the Act has other little flourishes: The legislation targets the Russian energy sector, allowing the U.S. to sanction companies involved in developing Russian oil pipelines. It "would almost surely affect a controversial pipeline project between Russia and Germany known as Nord Stream 2, which is owned by Gazprom but includes financial stakes from European companies. The project aims to carry Russian natural gas under the Baltic Sea, bypassing countries like Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States," as the *New York Times* reports.

Some may see these events simply as the riposte to alleged Russian intervention in America's internal affairs (as Feinstein has argued), but polls (even CNN polls) suggest that there are very obvious political limits to the Establishment (in both parties) using "Russia-gate" as a mechanism to mobilize and widen public support for removing President Trump. Polls indicate that 79 percent of Republicans are "not at all" or "not very" concerned about Trump's alleged links with Russia, and that inversely, precisely the same proportion, 79 percent, of Democrats precisely are "very" or "somewhat" concerned. (55 percent of Independents side with Republicans with 37 percent "not at all" and 18 percent "not very" concerned). The point here is that the Republican support for Trump's desire for détente with Russia has not eroded one jot, whereas the "concern" of the Independents and even among Democrats is eroding somewhat.

This is the crux: the clique around former CIA head John Brennan *et al* have put their shirt on "Russia-gate" to bring down Trump – claiming scandal. But what goes around – quite often – comes comes around. Unless the Establishment can keep up the tempo of innuendo or produce new revelations, "Russia-gate" may just become a stale narrative – or a butt of satire. Worse, the meme could turn and bite the hand of those who have been feeding it. There may too be other skeletons in the cupboard, but belonging to the other party: like who paid Fusion GPS (who were commissioned to produce the "dirty dossier" on Trump)? Might the murdered Seth Rich story take another turn? Or, the fugitive former DNC Chairwoman's IT staffer, Imran Awan, give the narrative a different twist? Or something as yet unknown.

Vague Sanctions

How far will the anti-Russian attrition go? The *Ron Paul Institute* sees in one section of the Act, the possibility that websites which take a line in opposition to Russia sanctions could be held to be doing the work of Russian

intelligence – by seeking to influence readers in a manner that Russian intelligence would want. Might this be interpreted as “engaging in transactions” – albeit, over the internet? (The Act specifies punishment for “persons” who are “engaging in transactions with the intelligence or defense sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation.”)

The author writes, [that] at first sight, one might think he is reading too much into the text, “however as a twelve-year Capitol Hill veteran bill-reader, I can assure you that these bills are never written in a simple, expository manner. There is always a subtext, and in this case we must consider the numerous instances where the Director of Central Intelligence and other senior leadership in the US intelligence community have attempted to establish the idea that foreign news channels such as RT or Sputnik News, are not First Amendment protected press, but rather tools of a foreign intelligence organization.”

So, are Trump’s hopes for détente with Russia all done? Too early to say, I suggest. Medvedev seems categorical, but maybe his dark prognostication is intended more to underline to Americans that their relations with Russia are not some domestic “game show” – but rather, are profoundly serious. For the time being, substantive U.S. politics with Russia will be on “a long vacation.”

The deeper question is whether the U.S. Deep State is overreaching itself. First, we have this sanctions bill, and then the news that special counsel Robert Mueller, as part of his investigation into the Trump campaign’s potential dealings with the Kremlin, is using a Grand Jury to issue subpoenas. While the use of a Grand Jury does not necessarily mean an indictment is imminent, it is a tool to compel witnesses to testify or force people to turn over sensitive documents that may aid investigators in their probe.

It is a sign of a yet more aggressive approach to gathering “Russia-gate” evidence – a search that will now encompass all the Trump family’s financial affairs. Overreach? (So far, evidence of misdeed, is missing.)

As indicated earlier, Trump’s Republican base (unlike support from the Republican establishment) is not eroding, but rather is becoming angered and resentful. The more the MSM and the East Coast élites attack the deplorables’ “alt” news and websites – the greater the pushback, it seems. The divisions in America are too embittered now, for any thought that America can somehow re-wind the tape, and just start again with Obama having left office – as though Trump never had happened.

Strategic Incoherence

Whereas, America’s Russia foreign policy clearly has been zombie-fied for now,

the policy dysfunction goes much wider than Russia (and this cannot be laid at the feet of the Deep State). The policy in the Middle East simply, is strategically incoherent:

Last Tuesday, President Trump, standing beside Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri heaped Lebanon with praise: "Lebanon is on the front lines in the fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda *and Hezbollah*," Trump said. Hariri had – delicately – to correct the President: Hizbullah is a member of his governing coalition, and is a part of his government, and is his ally in parliament. Actually, Lebanon is fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria, precisely via Hezbollah.

But this trivial incident should not be written off as some distracted President "mis-speaking": rather it is symptomatic of how dysfunctional the West Wing has become in respect to the Middle East. There seems to be no adult in the team – just jaundiced ignorance that does not bother to try to understand Middle East complexities.

Joe Scarborough sums this condition well in an article which – whilst highly complimentary to the personal qualities of Trump's family – also warns against "the stubborn arrogance that often infects the winning side of Presidential campaigns." Trump's victory led his son-in-law to believe "he could reinvent government like Al Gore, micromanage the White House like James Baker, and restructure the Middle East like Moses. Kushner's confidence seemed to reach its apex," Scarborough continues, "whenever the subject turned to Middle East peace. His bizarre belief that the world began anew the day Trump was inaugurated was exposed again this week when a leaked audiotape caught Kushner telling White House interns: *"We don't want a history lesson. We've read enough books."*

Well perhaps he needs to read some books on Iran, before deciding to call Iran in default on JCPOA (the accord that tightly restricts Iran's nuclear program). He does not need to like Iran, but merely to understand that it is a major regional power (with real "battalions" at its command), and, unlike most in the Middle East, is capable of acting shrewdly, effectively and forcefully – if needs be.

Mishandling a Crisis

The sense of an absence of strategic knowledge in the West Wing is not confined to Trump's adversaries, by the way. Iran sees the U.S. calling "Iran in default of JCPOA" as merely serving to cement its fast growing alliance with Russia and China – but the complaint has also found an (unexpected) home in Israel, too – for example, see this, from one of Israel's most well-connected journalists, Ben Caspit:

“The story that best illustrates this situation occurred last week when the Temple Mount crisis threatened to ignite the entire Middle East in a global conflagration originating in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Throughout that entire crisis, the US administration was effectively AWOL. Although they attempted to take credit for some deep involvement in efforts to reach a solution, the truth is that the Americans were not a significant factor during the harshest days of the crisis, when it looked like the entire Middle East would spiral downward into a new round of violence.

“President Trump himself was not involved in events as they unfolded. His special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, lost his standing as an ‘impartial mediator’ in the very first days of the crisis. One senior Palestinian source told *Al-Monitor* on condition of anonymity that ‘Greenblatt picked a side and represented Netanyahu throughout the crisis ... the Americans’ behaviour throughout the crisis only furthered the feeling prevalent in Ramallah over the past few weeks that Greenblatt and Jared Kushner are irrelevant.”

“ ‘They are completely unfamiliar with the other side,’ [another Palestinian source told Caspit] ‘they don’t understand the region, and they don’t understand the material. You can’t learn about what is happening here in a seminar lasting just a few weeks...’

“A senior Israeli minister speaking on condition of anonymity added, ‘The Americans aren’t really a presence here. They let us do whatever we want. They don’t set the tone, and they don’t dictate the agenda.’

“Ostensibly, this near freedom of action should be the dream of the Israeli right. But even among them, people are beginning to express their concern about how things are unfolding. ‘This was as clear as can be during the Temple Mount crisis. There was no responsible adult in the mix.’ ”

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