



Sen. Lindsey Graham stands at the heart of Republican discord on Trump and Russia

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After six years of contention with Democrats controlling the White House and Republicans controlling at least one chamber of Congress, Donald Trump's victory was supposed to usher in a more unified era.

The Republican president-elect, after all, will take office as both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives remain controlled by Republicans. But before many of Trump's policies are even known, cracks in the unification are appearing. The cracks are small, and it looks at this point like they are all related to foreign policy, or more specifically Russia. But at the heart of this looming discord is U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

Graham, with the substantial help of U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has made it clear that he won't be backing down on Russia in the name of party unity or to please a new president. When asked to comment, Graham's reply by email was simple: "I'll support him when I think he's right. And **I'll oppose him when I think he's** wrong."

He **expanded on that a bit by adding**, "There will be areas of agreement, and I'll support him in those. And in others I will speak my mind and do my job."

Anthony H. Cordesman, an expert in geopolitics and international security at the D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, a bipartisan think tank, was quick to point out that foreign policy is presidential turf. The president will set the tone, and Trump's actual foreign policy isn't yet known. But Cordesman said he suspected that a political outsider such as Trump was about to get a lesson in the limitations on presidential power.

"Does the president face the prospect of pressure from his own party, as well as from Democrats?" he asked in a telephone interview. "That's been clear throughout the campaign, and that won't go away after the inauguration."

He also said foreign policy wasn't as easy as a single policy. Each issue requires its own policy. Even when dealing with Russia, there are differences among how to deal with President

Vladimir Putin regarding Ukraine and Syria, **suspected interference in the U.S. election** and the future of NATO.

Still, Cordesman said, most of the foreign policy community agrees with Graham.

As does the American public, apparently. A new poll by the nonpartisan Chicago Council on Global Affairs, done last Friday through Sunday, indicated that even among Trump's own party only a slim majority – 51 percent – opposes a congressional inquiry into alleged Russian interference in the U.S. elections. Overall, 65 percent of Americans want one. Trump has been dismissive of the need for this, while Graham and McCain have been strongly in favor.

The opinion poll indicated that, in general, Americans have their lowest opinion of Russia since the mid-1980s, during the final phase of the Cold War.

Nile Gardiner, the director of the conservative D.C.-based Heritage Foundation's Thatcher Center for Freedom, said it was difficult to see the cozy Trump rhetoric of the campaign trail actually becoming policy. His belief is that Graham and McCain are "seeking to influence the direction of policy, as they should."

Gardiner said Trump's foreign policy would be shaped by "the reality of the situation."

"Broadly across the conservative movement, there is a view that Russia is a threat," he said. "You can't have a cordial relationship with someone who is a threat to NATO. The next administration will be expected to adopt a more robust Russia policy."

And Graham's line is robust. When he appeared on CNN earlier in December he said, "Trump should take a real tough tone with Russia. I think they're one of the most destabilizing influences on the world stage. . . . It's pretty clear to me that WikiLeaks was designed to hurt Clinton, and it could be us tomorrow. . . . I'm going after Russia in every way you can go after Russia. I want Putin personally to pay a price."

However, Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy expert at the libertarian-leaning Washington-based Cato Institute, said it would be a mistake to underestimate the damage Graham and McCain could do to the incoming president's first foreign-policy plans.

"I think those two could have a significant impact, and given their views that's unfortunate," he said, describing the senators as "ultra-hawkish." "In fact, it's dangerous."

He said that by itself, returning to a level of animosity last seen in the tense stretches of the Cold War was of dubious value for the United States. But given that the president-elect appears to be intent on taking a "much harder line than we have with China in the past," poking the Russian bear is doubly worrisome.

He noted that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger long ago established that U.S. foreign policy had to leave the nation closer to either China or Russia than they were to each other. Combine the increased tensions that Trump is building with China with the course being plotted by Graham and McCain and, he said, there is a real cause to worry.

"Graham and McCain are at the extreme end of views towards Russia," Carpenter said. "And what they think and how they act matters. These are not two back-benchers. These are two senior and highly influential senators."

His advice to them: Settle down. Russia today is a regional power, though one with nuclear arms.

“Their approach is blind to any idea of caution,” Carpenter said. “It’s the belief that we can prevail in every respect; that we can dictate terms to Russia and Russia will always back down. It’s not a realistic view.”

In addition to how vigorously to investigate CIA allegations that Russia tried to influence the U.S. elections, experts think the confirmation process for Trump’s secretary of state nominee, Rex Tillerson, will be informative, both of what Trump’s foreign policy plans are and for how strongly they will be supported or opposed by his party. Tillerson, the Exxon Mobil CEO, has a long and friendly relationship with Russia. Already Graham has wondered about the depth of that relationship.

For Trump, success in the Senate rests on a thin GOP majority, and Graham’s foreign policy differences can make the math very difficult.

Cordesman said that in the end, the senators would have to accept that foreign policy was the prerogative of the president. Congress becomes involved when the president tries to get the budget for his priorities.

“The truth is that Graham is an outlier on this. He doesn’t speak for the whole Senate or the Republican Party on this,” Cordesman said. “He may be right, though.”