

Rand Paul offering Russian invitations he might not be able to keep

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As Russian officials push U.S. Sen. Rand Paul to help organize a meeting between members of each country's foreign affairs committee, the chairman of the Senate's committee is trying to distance his group from Paul's recent invitation.

"No invitation has been extended from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," said a spokesperson for U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, chairman of the committee.

Paul's senior adviser, Doug Stafford, stated that by engaging with officials in Moscow, Paul is "acting in his role as a Senator and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and in cooperation with President Trump and the State Department."

The State Department immediately declined to comment on the matter. The White House did not immediately return a request for comment.

During a trip to Moscow on Monday, Paul invited members of the Russian parliament's upper house to Washington, D.C., to "continue dialogue on vital issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and combating terrorism."

One of those invitees was Konstantin Kosachev, who urged Paul to loop in his fellow members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"The issue at hand is trying, perhaps, to organize a new meeting, this time at the level of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee during the autumn session, that is, before the end of this year," Kosachev told state media.

Paul has broken with lawmakers on Russia in the past, pursuing diplomatic relations even as congressional leaders agreed in July to place broad sanctions on Russia for its interference with U.S. elections.

"Other senators — most of whom continue to advocate for the same old failed foreign policy that leads to perpetual war — may join in efforts for dialogue, diplomacy, and peace if they see

fit," Stafford wrote in the statement. "Senator Paul didn't need anyone's permission to extend this invite."

Paul's trip is not funded by the Senate, but by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by Charles Koch.

On Russia, the Cato Institute encourages policymakers to coordinate with leaders in Moscow on issues like nonproliferation and ending the Syrian civil war. Its policy handbook also advocates for replacing current American sanctions on Russia with ones that aim to impede the modernization of Russia's military.

Khristine Brookes, a spokeswoman from the Cato Institute, said that it did not set up the meetings with any of the Russian government officials, but it did set up meetings with other non-government organizations and booked sight-seeing trips.

"Cato Institute scholars have long believed that the United States should engage diplomatically with the world, trade freely, and work with other countries on common concerns," including engaging in dialogue over military confrontation, she wrote in a statement.

Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at Princeton University and New York University, said that in the past Congress organized regular formal exchanges between the Russian Duma and Congress of the type Paul suggested — but that was before talk of further sanctions and Russian interference in U.S. elections.

Paul's trip is in "the spirit of what existed," Cohen said.

In meetings with Paul, Russian leaders have commented on how sanctions have limited diplomatic relations with the United States.

The Trump administration's most recent sanctions against Russia have targeted Russian oligarchs tied to President Vladimir Putin and the companies they control, including oil and gas giants. The sanctions are meant to punish Putin's inner circle for its interference in the 2016 elections. But sanctions were first instituted against Russia by former President Barack Obama in 2014 when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

On Paul's agenda was also a meeting with former Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev.

"This shows that Senator Paul has a sense of history," Cohen said, adding that Gorbachev remains a symbol of progress in Russia-U.S. relations.

Cohen applauded Paul's efforts to work in coordination with Trump to warm relationships between the two nuclear powers from his position in Congress. Given the Constitution affords Congress a role in foreign policy, Paul is right to step into a diplomatic role, Cohen added.

"The relationship with Russia is more dangerous than it's ever been," he said. "Why leave it to Trump?"