



Why Trump Is Getting Away With Foreign-Policy Insanity

Stephen M. Walt

July 18, 2018

If U.S. President Donald Trump wanted to provoke most of the foreign-policy establishment into a feeding frenzy, then his bizarre, baffling, and in many ways pathetic performance at the Helsinki meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday was a success. But his behavior is still hard to fathom: A guy who is trying to convince us that he isn't Putin's puppet and likes to portray himself as tough, strong, and "like, really smart" ended up exposing himself (again) as inarticulate, ill-prepared, gullible, and seemingly incapable of standing up to his Russian counterpart. If this were any other presidency, he'd be toast.

It was never entirely clear why he was so eager to meet with Putin anyway. The administration had deliberately lowered expectations before the meeting, aware that the two leaders were not in a position to reach important agreements about anything. Most observers expected a typical Trumpian photo-op and a bland communique like the one issued after the Singapore summit with Kim Jong Un last month, followed by a bunch of boastful tweets about how the president had singlehandedly gotten U.S.-Russian relations back on track.

Instead, what the world saw was a U.S. president rejecting the findings of his own intelligence services—now headed by his own appointees, by the way—and accepting at face value Putin's entirely predictable denials. Trump also tossed in a word salad of discredited conspiracy theories about former Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's email server and other irrelevant nonsense, and he said that the legitimate investigation into possible Russian interference was utterly baseless and bad for the country. (That very last claim might be true—i.e., the suspicion that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia *is* bad for the country—but whether it is without foundation remains to be seen.)

The response to Trump's performance was immediate, overwhelming, and almost entirely negative. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* accused Trump of "treasonous behavior" and

concluded, “Donald Trump is either an asset of Russian intelligence or really enjoys playing one on TV.” Former CIA head John Brennan agreed that Trump’s performance was “nothing short of treasonous,” a charge echoed at length by former Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck and repeated by many others. Even normally discreet officials such as former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and my colleague Ash Carter, a former secretary of defense, were visibly appalled, with Burns calling the press conference “the single most embarrassing performance by an American president on the world stage that I’ve ever seen,” and Carter saying, “it was like watching the destruction of a cathedral.”

Prominent Republicans also found Trump’s actions hard to defend or excuse. Despite the lamentable lack of backbone in today’s GOP, a number of Republican VIPs distanced themselves from Trump’s comments, and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) called it “one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory.” Even well-known GOP grandee Newt Gingrich, normally a Trump defender, joined the chorus of critics, calling it “the most serious mistake of his presidency.”

When you’ve lost Gingrich, you really are in trouble, which is why Trump returned home and tried to walk it all back, saying that he had gotten confused by a double negative in one sentence of his statement. His account was ostensibly enough to mollify Gingrich, of course, but nobody with a scintilla of integrity was likely to be convinced.

No one knows why Trump chose to act as he did in Helsinki, or why he’s been so forgiving of Russia all along. To be clear: Trump is correct to say that U.S.-Russian relations are in a bad place and that it would be better if they could be improved. More controversially, I also think he is correct in acknowledging that the United States bears much (though not all) of the responsibility for that situation, due to misguided policies such as NATO expansion. And let’s be honest for a second: The United States is hardly blameless when it comes to interfering in other countries’ internal politics. Nor is it a passive innocent in the world of cyberespionage.

Yet none of these considerations require a U.S. president to ignore the possibility that another state actively interfered in America’s own electoral process and continues to do so today. The fact that the United States interfered in other countries in the past is not a reason to excuse another state interfering there—that would be like saying it’s perfectly OK for an adversary to bomb Los Angeles because the United States has bombed Berlin or Baghdad. Trump could believe all the propositions in the previous paragraph and still fly off to Helsinki determined to confront Putin about Russia’s actions in 2016 and since. Ideally, he’d first line up a lot of allied support and confront the Russian leader from a position of strength. This approach hardly precludes reaching a constructive agreement with Moscow; it just makes it more likely that the agreement would be in the United States’ favor. Thus far, however, Trump has used the opposite approach, which is one reason foreign leaders such as Putin and Kim keep picking his pocket.

Why does he act this way? I don’t know. Maybe Russia really does have compromising material on Trump’s personal conduct. Maybe there was collusion between people in Trump’s campaign and Russian officials or agents, and he knows they can expose the connections. Maybe there’s real dirt about the Trump Organization’s alleged involvement in money laundering by Russian

oligarchs. Maybe Trump just admires Putin as a strong leader and wishes he could be more like him. Or maybe the president is genuinely interested in improving relations for sound strategic reasons, like weaning Moscow off of China, but he is too ignorant, unskilled, impatient, and erratic to know how to do that effectively. Or maybe he believes admitting that Russia did in fact interfere would tarnish his victory over Clinton, undermine his legitimacy as president, and wound his fragile ego.

But what is to be done? At this point, it is no longer news that the U.S. president is incompetent, careless, venal, an inveterate liar, and concerned only about his own image and the support of his base. Nor is it news that most of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment is horrified by his conduct and deeply alarmed by what he is doing to many of the institutions, commitments, and other endeavors to which they have devoted their lives. Indeed, the establishment's deep opposition to Trump—an aversion that crossed party lines—has been apparent since the 2016 campaign, when a host of prominent Republican foreign-policy officials publically opposed Trump's candidacy, questioning his character and declaring him "utterly unfitted to the office."