

Rand finds lots to like in Trump's presser with Putin

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As the GOP's long-dominant hawkish wing hammers President Donald Trump over his chummy appearance Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a minority of Republicans aren't ready to clip their president's diplomatic wings.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), whose non-interventionist streak has long put him at odds with GOP foreign policy orthodoxy, plans to travel to Russia in early August to play shuttle diplomacy for Trump. In an interview on Monday, Paul said he hopes to meet with Trump before he heads overseas to "to see if there's anything he wants us to follow up on."

"It's gotten so ridiculous that someone has to stand up and say we should try to engage even our adversaries and open up our lines of communication," Paul said. "We're going to talk to the president about some small steps in order to try to thaw the relations between our countries."

It's hard to imagine any other GOP president empowering a legislator like Paul to pursue his goals of diplomacy with a longtime adversary like Russia. Paul's focus, for now, is on cultural exchange and fostering cross-Atlantic visits by U.S. and Russian ambassadors.

To be sure, Paul has few Republican companions who share in his embrace of Trump's approach to Russia. But some of his colleagues are also prepared to give Trump a wider runway in his dealings with Putin.

Two weeks before Trump met with Putin in Helsinki, a group of seven GOP senators and one House member visited Russia over the July 4 holiday week — a trip that would have been unthinkable when President Barack Obama was in office.

Those senators said they talked tough with top officials like Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, despite the Russian media's portrayal of them as weak on Moscow. And though they certainly don't cite Russia as a friend, they believe Trump's engagement with Putin is the right call.

Asked whether Trump made a mistake by going to Helsinki, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) replied: "No, no, no."

Johnson, who indicated openness to relaxing some sanctions on Russia after joining the visit there, suggested that Trump's news conference with Putin may be "trying to improve relations, with the public face you put on it."

"The president's got a delicate task in one sense, because engagement even with someone as evil as Putin is necessary," added Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn of Texas. "They way I interpret it is the president is trying to maintain some rapport with him."

GOP voices more critical of Paul and Trump's stance toward Russia took center stage on Monday. Mitt Romney called Trump's performance alongside Putin "disgraceful" and Sen. John McCain called the meeting with Putin a "tragic mistake."

But Paul chalks that up to "Trump derangement syndrome." He believes his trip, planned in concert with the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, will allow the United States to eventually make inroads with Russia in the ongoing civil war in Syria, denuclearizing North Korea and getting Russian troops out of Ukraine.

"Republicans that are making the criticism are either the pro-war Republicans like McCain and Graham or the anti-Trump ones like Sasse," Paul said. "They are motivated by their persistent and consistent dislike of the president."

Indeed, Trump has gradually but significantly shifted the GOP's views of Russia, in part because as leader of the party, he has made it impossible for its lawmakers to criticize him and win primaries. Though Trump declined on Monday to endorse the U.S. intelligence committee's assessment of Russian meddling in the election and suggested the bad relationship between the United States and Russia was both countries' fault, many Republicans praised him as forceful with Russia in deed -- if not necessarily always in word.

"It was a good idea for the president to meet with Putin and discuss the issues. Take a look at how tough the president has been on Putin: It's been incredibly tougher than previous administrations," said Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), mentioning sanctions and providing weapons to Ukraine. "It's important."

Montana Sen. Steve Daines, another Republican who traveled to Russia during this month's delegation, said that "the intelligence community has been very clear that they interfered in our elections" despite Trump's attempt to assign equal blame.

"It's appropriate — very appropriate — to confront President Putin with the behavior of Russia, which is unacceptable," Daines said. Asked whether Trump had offered that sort of confrontation, Daines said he had yet to see the president's news conference.

Trump's most vocal foreign policy critics were more outraged than ever. Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), for instance, said the president made the United States look like a "pushover."

But most Republicans tried to thread a needle that may not really exist: thrashing Putin while praising Trump — or laying off of him altogether.

"President Trump won. Hillary lost. It's time for Democrats and the media to move on, and the president should keep on being forceful with Russia," a spokeswoman for GOP Senate candidate Josh Hawley of Missouri told the Springfield News-Leader.

No Republican was more bullish on Trump's performance than Paul, who voted against last year's overwhelmingly popular bill slapping sanctions on Russia. Paul is also a longtime skeptic of the hawkish Republican advisers whom Trump has surrounded himself with, from national security adviser John Bolton to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Yet when it comes to the fraught relationship with Russia, it turned out that Trump is much closer to the junior senator from Kentucky than any of the GOP establishment hawks around the president himself.

“We have a lot of areas ... we should be talking about,” Paul said of Russia. “We won’t get anywhere on it if we just say we want ... to put more sanctions on them and tomorrow they’ll surrender and do what we want.”

Paul expects to get a chance to try out his brand of diplomacy himself next month when he meets with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, staff in the opposition media, and other Russian officials.