

## Trump's step toward Putin seals a new world order

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President Donald Trump cast his meeting Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin as a step “towards a brighter future.”

But the global community had a different assessment: The summit in Helsinki signaled the manifestation of a new world order.

As Trump decamped from his weeklong trip to Europe, he was holding up America's friends as its “foes” and presenting Russia, the former superpower scorned by his predecessor as a fading regional player, as significant enough to be in competition with the U.S.

Trump, during a surreal joint news conference following the meeting, showed deference to Putin by repeatedly refusing to criticize the Russian president, noting that his description of him as a “competitor” was meant purely as a compliment.

At another point, Trump stepped in to answer a pointed question directed at Putin, only days after special counsel Robert Mueller indicted a dozen Russian intelligence agents for allegedly hacking the Democratic National Committee and his 2016 opponent Hillary Clinton's campaign to help Trump win the contest. Trump told reporters that while he has “great confidence” in U.S. intelligence officials, “President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.”

Mueller's spokesman declined comment.

The president's regard for Putin — who on Monday affirmed his preference for Trump in the 2016 election — contrasted sharply with his increasingly tough talk toward Europe, language that chips away at international order, to still unclear effect. A similar dynamic played out last month in Singapore, when Trump left flustered allies, including Canada, behind after departing the G-7 summit to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, whom he called “tough” and “very smart.”

“It's just really striking,” said [Thomas Wright](#), director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution. “I think it shows he's much more comfortable with strongman adversaries than he is with democratic allies.”

For Trump, who often expresses his views on trade and economics as a zero-sum game, his friendliness toward a country or region can be measured by the degree to which they are seen as an economic threat to the U.S., experts noted. By that measure, Europe and Canada are far

scarier than Russia — despite it being at the center of years of Republican attacks on Democrats over security issues.

Though Trump has long expressed affection for authoritarian rulers, it's the degree to which Trump is eroding U.S. relationships with other countries around the world that is leading some to call for the resignation of his top officials and commanding the focus of spurned foreign leaders.

Trump over the past week lashed out at European leaders, suggesting that NATO nations double the amount of their gross domestic product that they spend on defense; ripped German officials for approving a natural gas pipeline link from Russia; falsely denied criticizing British Prime Minister Theresa May behind her back; and answered a CBS interviewer's question about who he considers to be his biggest foe by naming the European Union. Trump specifically cited "what they do to us on trade."

"Now you wouldn't think of the European Union, but they're a foe," he added. "Russia is a foe in certain respects. China is a foe economically, certainly a foe."

In Germany, Trump's rebuke left such a lashing that the country's foreign minister said he has no choice but to believe that Europe can no longer count on the president and must begin further turning inward for support.

"We can no longer completely rely on the White House," Heiko Maas told the Funke newspaper group. "To maintain our partnership with the USA we must readjust it. The first clear consequence can only be that we need to align ourselves even more closely in Europe."

Added Maas: "Europe must not let itself be divided however sharp the verbal attacks and absurd the tweets may be."

The backlash in Britain was already setting in when Trump slammed May in The Sun tabloid and spoke glowingly about her political rival.

Thousands protested in the streets under a giant balloon depicting Trump as an orange baby and headlines blasted his break with protocol by walking in front of Queen Elizabeth.

Trump opened Monday blaming historically strained relations with Russia on American "foolishness and stupidity" and the investigation into Russian election meddling, which he dismisses as a "rigged witch hunt." Despite earlier putting Russia on his list of adversaries, Trump's Europe trip seemed to give Putin few reasons to be displeased overall.

Putin, for his part, seemed to shape-shift from international outlaw into veteran statesman, calm, cool and collected. Only once did he seem to directly confront the Trump agenda, when he credited the Iran nuclear deal that Trump tore up for allowing the Middle East country to "become the most controlled in the world."

But experts who lauded the relationship-building goals of the meeting suggest the larger context surrounding it were not conducive to long-term success, including the Russian hacking indictments handed down Friday, last week's NATO summit and last month's G-7. The former is a particularly sensitive subject for Trump because it threatens to undercut his own role in the 2016 victory.

"The whole concept of that came up perhaps a little bit before, but it came out as a reason why the Democrats lost an election which, frankly, they should have been able to win, because the

Electoral College is much more advantageous for Democrats, as you know, than it is to Republicans,” Trump said in response to a question meant for Putin about why he should be believed that Russia didn’t interfere.

Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, and a proponent of the meeting, said Trump’s answers won’t soon settle the charged subject.

“It amounts to the president of the United States appearing to give more credence to the claims of Vladimir Putin than to the claims of his own intelligence, law enforcement and national security agencies.”

But Preble, noting the awkward timing of the meeting, urged skeptics not to discount possible long-term benefits for the U.S. relationship with Russia, not Europe.

He concluded: “I didn’t expect Donald Trump to say or do anything dramatically different than what he said and did.”