

The Trump-Putin Meeting in Helsinki Caused Panic and Doubt

By: Dr. Abdullah Robin

Who would have imagined that getting Trump into the White House would be such an effective way of making a revolutionary reversal in the direction of US policy and international relations? Trump's opponents are so blinded by his character flaws that they use his destabilization of the old world order as a mere pretext to attack him, while his supporters justify his actions. They are all so busy with the personality of Trump that neither side admits that their country is changing course in a decisive manner. They have believed for so long in an international order of rules and values dictated by the US, and they have known nothing else, that his supporters cannot imagine that really Trump means to destroy it, while his opponents want only to prove to the country how foolish and weak he is.

US president Trump's meeting with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on the 16th of July shocked US congressmen, and raised many questions. Senator Bernie Sanders said about Trump: "I was absolutely outraged by his behavior in Helsinki, where he really sold the American people out, and it makes me think that either Trump doesn't understand what Russia has done, not only to our elections, but to cyberattacks against all parts of our infrastructure ... or perhaps he is being blackmailed by Russia because they may have compromising information about him."

After a private meeting that lasted more than 90 minutes, there was a press conference, where Trump and Putin made vague and general statements about working together on various issues. Trump said days before the Helsinki meeting that Europe was a 'foe' of America, but at Helsinki he made it sound as if his political opponents and the intelligence agencies in the US were foes also. He even agreed publicly with Putin's proposal that if the US intelligence agencies wanted to interrogate Russians accused of interfering in the elections, then the Russians should also be allowed to interrogate US citizens. The US Senate was so concerned that they voted 98-0 on a resolution that the U.S. "should refuse to make available any current or former diplomat, civil servant, political appointee, law enforcement official or member of the Armed Forces of the United States for questioning by the government of Vladimir Putin."

A poll about Trump's handling of the meeting with Putin in Helsinki showed that 68% of Republicans supported it. Significant numbers of Republican Senators were, nevertheless, very critical. Senator Lindsey Graham said that allowing Russia to question Americans would be "absurd and naïve," while Senator John Cornyn said it was a "terrible" offer. Republicans were also anxious about what Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov meant when he said 2 days after the meeting that Trump and Putin had entered into "important verbal agreements." Senator Jeff Flake said: "We've got to find out what the Russian ambassador was referring to yesterday ... We don't know. We have no idea. We've got to find that out." Senator Rob Portman said: "I don't know what happened privately, nobody does" and about Trump's claim that he discussed US grievances with Putin privately, he said: "It's not enough just to raise it privately because everyone is watching, including our allies." Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker also complained that he has "no idea" what happened, and expressed concern when the White House announced "a second meeting so they can begin implementation."

Putin said that there was discussion of holding a referendum in eastern Ukraine, which the White House later denied. The suggestion that the White House might concede eastern Ukraine to Russia would smash the confidence of European allies. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell tried to give reassurance: "We believe the European Union countries are our friends and the Russians are not," while Senator Jerry Moran warned the Senate that: "Words matter. And what Americans say can bolster or shake confidence in the United States."

Trump's words and actions appear erratic, but senators cannot hide from US allies what they will not admit to themselves. The current US administration is acting on the doctrine that the US cannot afford to lead the 'free world' anymore, and that it must redefine its relations with former friends and foes without regard to the values and alliances of the past 70 years. Russia's GDP is less than that of Texas, while China and the EU are ascending powers, so the US is using Russia to constrain them.