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What Does Michael Flynn's Resignation Mean for U.S.-Russia Ties?

The Moscow Times Explains

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In this file photo taken on Dec. 10, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin with retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn attend an exhibition in Moscow, Russia. **Mikhail Klimentyev / AP**

On Feb 13, Donald Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned over his contacts with Russia. He is alleged to have illegally discussed sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak, before starting his role at the White House and on the day that the Obama administration was implementing its own sanctions against Russia.

Flynn's resignation has not only humiliated the Trump team. It has raised fundamental questions about Washington's new Russia policy.

How did Russia react?

Flynn was one of the "primary channels of communication with the Trump team" for Russia, says analyst Vladimir Frolov. However much Moscow tried there was "nothing it could do about it."

Russian official reactions were angry and bitter. Lawmakers, politicians and state television condemned the sidelining of Flynn as an anti-Russian move. Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the foreign affairs committee in the upper house of the Russian parliament, wrote that "Russophobia had permeated the White House."

Duma deputy Alexei Pushkov tweeted that "it was not Flynn who was targeted but relations with Russia."

How extensive *were* Michael Flynn's ties to Russia?

While the Trump campaign denied ties to Russia, it appears Flynn was in contact with Kislyak even before the US presidential election in November last year.

Russian analyst Dmitry Suslov says Flynn's five phone conversations with the ambassador on the day of sanctions were nothing out of the ordinary. "It was necessary for him to guarantee a smooth transition and devise a foreign policy for the administration," says Suslov.

Kislyak aside, Flynn's ties to Russia have long been raising eyebrows in Washington. In 2015, he visited Moscow and famously sat next to Vladimir Putin during a gala organized in honor of Russia's international state broadcaster RT.

There is an ongoing Army investigation – at the request of Congress – into Flynn's trip to the RT party and the payments he received from the channel for TV appearances. US law prohibits former generals from taking money from foreign governments without congressional approval. There is currently no evidence that Flynn filed the necessary paperwork to go to Moscow for the event.

Criminal charges for Flynn's attendance at the RT gala are unlikely but that does not mean he is completely "off the hook," says analyst Vladimir Frolov. There are many other unanswered questions. What other undisclosed meetings did he have with Russian officials during that trip?

While the willingness of a US general to be paid by RT at a dinner with Putin is unusual, security expert Mark Galeotti says this hardly means Flynn was "bought" by the Russians.

"His mistakes appear to have been products of arrogance and a belief in the irrelevance of accuracy more than any treasonous impulses," Galeotti told The Moscow Times.

Is Moscow unhappy with Ambassador Kislyak?

We know that it was the Russian ambassador who initiated the phone calls. "He broached a sensitive matter knowing the conversation was being monitored," says Frolov. Flynn, too, should have known that all embassy phones are tapped by the FBI.

The difference is that Kislyak realised what Flynn apparently did not: that no conversation at their level is confidential. For the Russian ambassador, Galeotti says, it would have been far more dangerous to appear to have been involved in a cover-up. "So he rightly just reported the facts," the security expert says.

The fact that the leak was on the American side, makes the issue an internal fight more than anything else.

Trump faces resistance to his administration from inside the American bureaucracy. Suslov says the information about the phone calls with Kislyak was more likely leaked by a low-ranked employee at the White House that may have not been replaced since the change of administration. "It was outright sabotage," he says.

It is not yet known who leaked the information.

How does Flynn's departure affect U.S.-Russia relations?

The Flynn scandal is a clear indicator of how sensitive the Russia topic remains inside the US elite. The American establishment is likely to watch Trump's Russia policy even more closely after it.

"They will attempt to impede cooperation with Moscow," says Suslov.

On the one hand, the loss of the man who most advocated closer ties with Russia inside the Trump administration may make way for a return to an "Obama-like" approach. "It will make lifting sanctions on Russia less likely without significant concession by Moscow in Ukraine," says Frolov. According to the analyst, there will also be less enthusiasm in Washington for joining forces with Russia in Syria.

If one of the main contenders to replace Flynn, General David Petraues, makes it to the White House it could tame the administration's enthusiasm for Putin. Petraues, former chief of the US army in Iraq, considered Russia and China as revisionist powers that threaten the world order.

But Flynn's resignations raises more questions than answers about the Russia-US ties under Donald Trump.

This relationship is still very much up for grabs. Flynn may have contributed to Trump's early liking for Putin but it is unknown to what extent he really influenced the president.

"A lot depends on the personal chemistry when Putin and Trump finally meet," says Galeotti. Only when the two meet face-to-face will they offer the world some answers.

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