

Impeach Trump For Treason?? How Unusual Is It for An Incoming U.S. Administration to Talk to Russian Leaders?

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Global Research, December 06, 2017

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Those who want to impeach Trump say his contacts (through Flynn and others) with high-level Russians, such as Russian Ambassador Kislyak, was treason ... or at the very least an impeachable offense.

Others - without any proof - say that the president-elect's team contacting foreign leaders is normal.

Who's right?

The New York Times [reports](#):

It is common and not improper for transition officials to meet with foreign officials.

[Jack Matlock](#), the 4-year U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987-1991, at the time that the USSR fell, [writes](#):

Our press seems to be in a feeding frenzy regarding contacts that President Trump's supporters had with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak and with other Russian diplomats. The assumption seems to be that there was something sinister about these contacts, just because they were with Russian diplomats. As one who spent a 35-year diplomatic career working to open up the Soviet Union and to make communication between our diplomats and ordinary citizens a normal practice, I find the attitude of much of our political establishment and of some of our once respected media outlets quite incomprehensible. What in the world is wrong with consulting a foreign embassy about ways to improve relations? Anyone who aspires to advise an American president should do just that.

Anyone interested in improving relations with Russia and avoiding another nuclear arms race—which is a vital interest of the United States—should discuss current issues with him and members of his staff. To consider him “toxic” is ridiculous. I understand that Michael Flynn resigned because he failed to inform the vice president of the full content of his conversation. I have no idea why that happened, but see nothing wrong with [Michael Flynn's] contact with Ambassador Kislyak so long as it was authorized by the

president-elect. Certainly, Ambassador Kislyak did nothing wrong.

If you want to understand the policy of another country, you need to consult that country's representatives. It is quite common for foreign diplomats to cultivate candidates and their staffs. That is part of their job. If Americans plan to advise the president on policy issues, they would be wise to maintain contact with the foreign embassy in question to understand that country's attitude toward the issues involved. Certainly, both Democrats and Republicans would contact Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin during the Cold War and discuss the issues with him. As the person in charge of our embassy in Moscow during several political campaigns, I would often set up meetings of candidates and their staffs with Soviet officials. Such contacts are certainly ethical so long as they do not involve disclosure of classified information or attempts to negotiate specific issues. In fact, I would say that any person who presumes to advise an incoming president on vital policy issues needs to understand the approach of the country in question and therefore is remiss if he or she does not consult with the embassy in question.

The whole brou-ha-ha over contacts with Russian diplomats has taken on all the earmarks of a witch hunt. President Trump is right to make that charge We have leaks that imply that any conversation with a Russian embassy official is suspect. That is the attitude of a police state, and leaking such allegations violates every normal rule regarding FBI investigations. President Trump is right to be upset, though it is not helpful for him to lash out at the media in general.

Finding a way to improve relations with Russia is in the vital interest of the United States. Nuclear weapons constitute an existential threat to our nation, and indeed to humanity. We are on the brink of another nuclear arms race which would be not only dangerous in itself, but would make cooperation with Russia on many other important issues virtually impossible. Those who are trying to find a way to improve relations with Russia should be praised, not scapegoated.

Michael McFaul, the U.S. Ambassador to Russia under President Obama, [also confirms](#) that the Russian Ambassador's contacts with U.S. officials under an incoming administration are not unusual, and that accusing the Russian Ambassador of being a "spymaster" flies in the face of reality.

ABC News [reports](#):

CNN cited anonymous current and former U.S. intelligence officials on Thursday as saying they believed Kislyak was a top spy and recruiter of spies. But former U.S. ambassadors, as well as analysts that know Kislyak, expressed strong skepticism about the claim, cautioning that besides Sessions' failure to acknowledge it there was little unusual that he had met with Kislyak.

"If he's a spy then all ambassadors are spies," said the former ambassador, Beyrle [John Beyrle, U.S. ambassador to Russia between 2008 and 2012]. "He's not a spy. To call him a spy is to misunderstand what a diplomat, even a Russian diplomat, does."

Steven Pifer, an expert at the Brookings Institution and a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, said he also thought Kislyak's meeting with Sessions

was more likely standard ambassadorial work.

“Short take: he was doing his job and trying to talk to someone who might give a sense of Trump’s policy leanings,” Pifer wrote in an email reply to ABC News.

Kislyak’s meeting with Sessions would be standard work for any ambassador, Beyrle said, saying it is the job of ambassadors to seek meetings with high-level officials in order to convey their government’s position, as well as trying to glean that of the U.S.

“Kislyak is doing what he’s supposed to be doing. He’s out there talking to as many influential Americans as he can. That’s his job,” Beyrle said. “It’s frankly not odd in the least for him to have met Jeff Sessions, a senior senator on the Armed Services Committee, up on Capitol Hill.”

Foreign Policy [writes](#):

Is it normal for presidential candidates to insert themselves into global events by dialing up heads of state? In fact, Obama did pretty much the same thing — multiple times, no less — as a candidate during the 2008 campaign.

Obama, [like Romney](#), embarked on a foreign trip as a candidate, meeting face-to-face with leaders such as [Afghan President Hamid Karzai](#), [German Chancellor Angela Merkel](#), [Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki](#), and [Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert](#) (headline: “Obama Talks Tough About Iran During Visit to Israel”). But he also placed several phone calls.

In January 2008, for example, Obama [reached out](#) to the two leaders at the center of a bitterly disputed election in Kenya, his father’s homeland. “What I urged was that all the leaders there, regardless of their position on the election, tell their supporters to stand down,” Obama explained at the time. The Bush-era State Department, which coordinated the calls with Obama, praised the effort. “Any time you have a person of stature ... who is pushing for a peaceful, political resolution, that’s a positive thing,” State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

Then, after hostilities erupted between Georgia and Russia in August 2008, both Obama and Republican challenger John McCain [phoned](#) Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, while condemning Russia for violating Georgia’s sovereignty. In fact, the candidates called Saakashvili so frequently — the Georgian leader [said](#) he heard from them “pretty often” — that it became a bit of a contest; when pressed by [Fox News](#), Saakashvili conceded that McCain had called first but that Obama was “very supportive.” In September, the prime minister [requested](#) a call with Obama to thank him for mentioning Georgia in his convention speech.

The campaign-trail diplomacy didn’t stop at phone calls. McCain [sent two of his allies in the Senate](#) — Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) — to Georgia at the height of the conflict, while Joe Biden, then a leading contender to be Obama’s running mate, [made](#) the trip himself.

And see [this](#).

Former National Defense University and Marine Corps University instructor, and special assistant to the secretary of Defense, James Robbins [writes](#):

There was ample precedent for the president-elect to put out feelers to foreign leaders.

- A memo from the [Podesta files](#) released by WikiLeaks shows that the Obama team had planned for the “president-elect and senior officials (to) begin confidential policy consultations with key actors in U.S. and abroad” between Thanksgiving and Inauguration Day.
- Obama also openly used emissaries and go-betweens to [meet with foreign leaders](#) during his transition.
- And for overwrought members of “the resistance” who think the unenforceable Logan Act is suddenly in play, recall that in 2008 then-candidate Obama arranged substantive [foreign policy discussions](#) with numerous foreign dignitaries and leaders during an [overseas campaign trip](#) before the election.

Slate [notes](#):

In a [2008 article](#) on President-elect Obama’s reluctance to meet personally with foreign leaders during the transition, the New York Times noted that “the Obama team is scrambling to arrange for surrogates to meet with visiting foreign officials.” During Ronald Reagan’s transition, Vice President-elect George H.W. Bush, a former CIA director, was delegated with [taking most of the calls from foreign ambassadors](#).

“Foreign governments are always interested in feeling out the incoming administration and it’s certainly not uncommon for representatives of the president-elect to have discussions with representatives of foreign powers just as an informational exercise to allow each side to get to know each other,” says David Clinton, chair of the political science department at Baylor University and co-author of *Presidential Transitions and American Foreign Policy*. “Such exchanges are part of modern day transitions.”

Peter Feaver, a National Security Council staffer in Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations who is now a professor at Duke, says this type of meeting “would be done quietly, it would be done without giving away any policy positions, binding the administration in any way or undercutting the current administration.”

Conversations that actively contradict the current administration’s foreign policy are problematic, but not unprecedented. The most famous example of this took place before an election, when Richard Nixon’s team reportedly [urged South Vietnamese officials](#) to scuttle peace talks organized by the Johnson administration, promising them a better deal under the new administration. And in 1980, the Washington Post reported that Jimmy Carter’s ambassador to El Salvador criticized President-elect Ronald Reagan’s advisers for undermining him by promising a shift in U.S. policy toward the country, then sliding into civil war.

The Verdict

Meetings between the president-elect's team and foreign officials are Normal.

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