



USA

Putin directly involved with US election hack? What that means for US-Russian relations

The latest twist in the hacking scandal adds uncertainty to the nations' complicated relationship.



Toru Hanai/AP | Caption



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DECEMBER 15, 2016 — Two US officials told NBC News that Russian President Vladimir Putin was likely directly involved in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee.

The hacks have made headlines over the past several months, with many Democrats partially attributing Hillary Clinton's loss of the presidential election to Russian interference. But while the hacking of the DNC has been linked to Russia for some time, this is the first time US officials have spoken about Mr. Putin's personal involvement with operation.

Russia and the United States are already at odds over conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. As evidence mounts for Putin's direct government involvement with affecting the US electoral process, it is not immediately clear what the next step would be for either country, especially considering the nearly polar-opposite stances of the incoming and outgoing US administrations on Russia.

Two senior US officials told NBC News that they had "a high level of confidence" that Putin personally directed how the hacks were leaked and used against DNC. Their assessment was reportedly based on new intelligence from diplomatic and US-allied intelligence sources. One official said that the campaign began as a "vendetta" against Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton before shifting to a focus that would create an idea that other countries "couldn't depend on the U.S. to be a credible global leader anymore."

The CIA has said that the Russian intention later became to help elect

Donald Trump, though other agencies have not fully supported this assessment. Nevertheless, 17 US intelligence agencies signed off on an October statement that "only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities."



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"The idea that a foreign power used computer espionage to try to influence a US election is truly explosive," Peter Rutland, professor of global issues and democratic thought at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., and expert on Russia-US relations, tells The Christian Science Monitor in an email. "Russia's doctrines of information security and hybrid war treat such operations as integral to the conduct of war. So the US could, if it so chose, treat it as an act of war. Of course with President-elect Trump wanting to mend bridges with Moscow he will do his best to suppress this story and deflect any congressional investigations that are launched, but it could dog him for months or years."

Russia has denied all claims of hacking on behalf of their government.

"This is amusing rubbish that has no basis in fact," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday on a conference call with reporters, according to Bloomberg.

While Putin has a reputation for corruption and shady political tactics in Russia, Dr. Rutland says it will likely remain impossible to make a definitive connection to the Russian president, even with an event of this magnitude.

"[Putin] will always have a shield of deniability: it could have been

freelancing Russians, or a rogue group within the security services, etc," Professor Rutland explains. "This has been the pattern for more serious allegations of assassinations etc. over the years. People can speculate that Putin 'must have known' about operation X or Y, but it is never been proven in any sense that would pass the standards of a court of law, or even of a careful historian."

President Obama's likely only path forward would be to open more thorough investigations on the subject of Russian hacking through the CIA or FBI, which Trump would almost certainly cancel. That would leave congressional investigators with the responsibility of using whatever information the current administration can gather in the few weeks remaining until Trump takes office. This timing has left Russia holding all the cards, says Rutland.

"First, there may be direct benefits to Russia from a Trump administration, such as a lifting of economic sanctions (which are still hurting the Russian economy); or political cooperation in Syria," he says. "Second, there are more speculative long-term benefits from sowing chaos in Washington – which could lead to a weakening or even dissolution of NATO; a sharp decline in US credibility as a global leader; and so on."

At the end of the cold war, Russia faded from a position of power on the world stage in what many in the former Soviet Union saw as a humiliating defeat at the hands of the West. But in recent years, under Putin's leadership, Russia has restored some of its lost prestige and global influence.

"In this instance, the past appears to have reared its ugly head," Usha Haley, a professor at West Virginia University and an expert on international business and international relations, tells the Monitor in

an email. "Let us not forget Mr. Putin's KGB roots and current efforts to revive the KGB's dominance in Russian life. The cyber-hacking and false internet news originating from Russian servers on Secretary Clinton appear part of an old Soviet KGB plan adapted to the information age."

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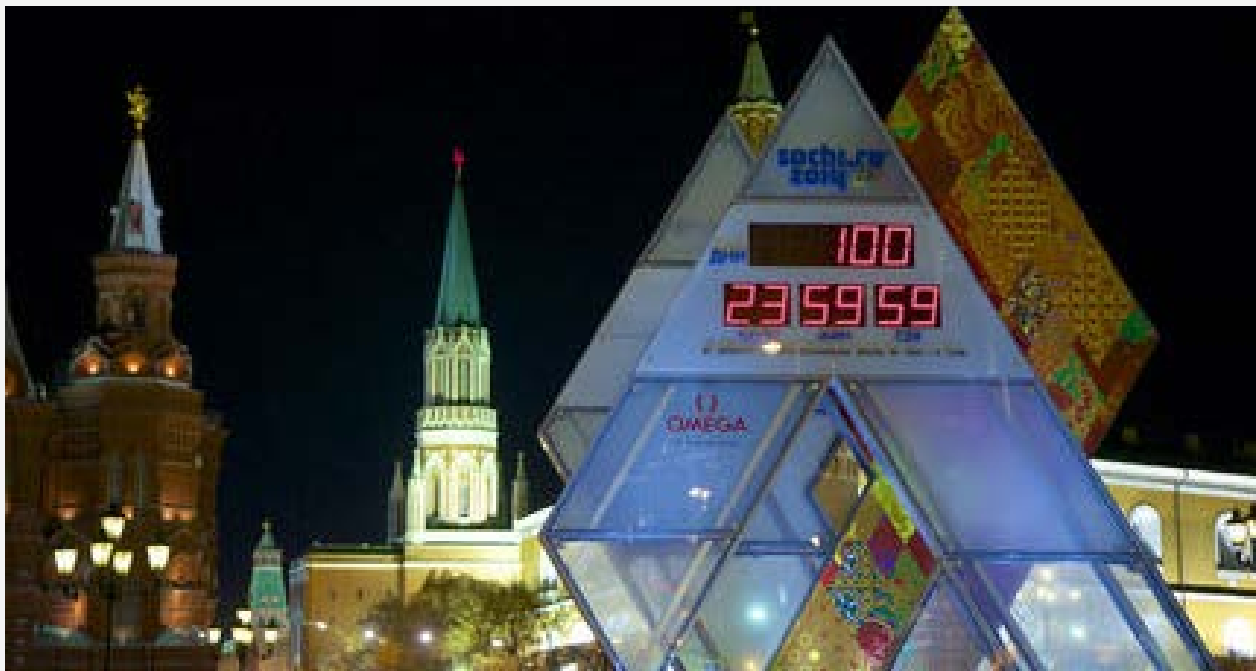
While Trump may pursue cordial relations with Putin, many Americans will likely regard the Russian Federation with suspicion. Some Republican lawmakers have expressed concerns about the hacking allegations, though many in the GOP have questioned the quality of the evidence linking Russia to the DNC hacks. Trump himself has denied any Russian influence towards his presidential victory.

"Back in the cold war, both the US and Soviet Union often got involved in trying to rig elections and influence political leadership in other

countries," says Rutland. "What's different about this is that it is the first time such a project has been directed at the United States itself. Another first is the apparent success of the project in producing tangible results – massive news coverage of the leaked emails, the resignation of Debbie Wasserman-Schultz as DNC chair and yes, possibly, a boost for Trump's electoral support."



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