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Amid the hype, the truth about Trump and Putin



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Chat

Trump is challenging dogmas in the US foreign policy establishment that Russia is by default an inveterate foe.



US President Donald Trump. (Photo: AP)

Is US President Donald Trump a foreign agent or a puppet of Russia? Has Russian President Vladimir Putin taken over the American government through the greatest stealth manoeuvre in world history? Such is the lurid speculation about the Trump administration's secret connections to the Kremlin that not even an international spy thriller of the John le Carré mould could beat the plot.

The "Russian hand" controversy has scalped its first victim — Mr Trump's initial appointee as national security adviser, Gen. Michael Flynn — and spawned multiple congressional as well as intelligence agency investigations of the American President's aides. Mr Trump has tried to hit back by alleging that his predecessor Barack Obama ordered illegal wiretapping of his communications last year in search of proof of his election campaign's collusion with Russian government officials.

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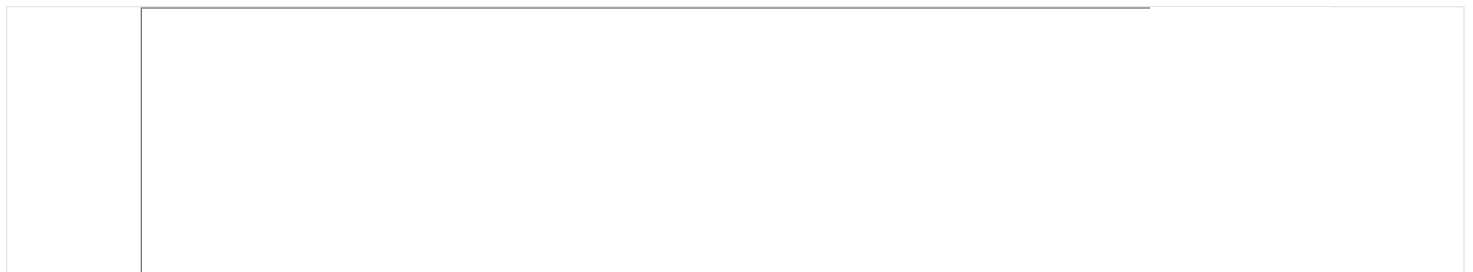
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Blaming Mr Putin's cyber-hacking and disinformation tactics is an alibi for liberals who failed to win in the last election season. "Russophobia" is also ingrained among various quarters of the US body politic. Mr Putin is the ultimate bugbear and villain for Western liberals. He reminds them of the Cold War and irritates them no end with his stubborn defiance of liberal sacred cows like globalisation, secularism, human rights, environmentalism, easy migration and multi-party democracy.



Mr Putin's conservative, religious and nationalistic credentials have indeed inspired Mr Trump's right-wing populism and they do share a strong empathy. Mr Trump's chief strategist Stephen Bannon has exhorted that "we, the Judeo-Christian West, really have to look at what Mr Putin is talking about as far as traditionalism goes, particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism."

The American "alt-right" movement that underpins Mr Trump's base finds in Mr Putin a perfect bedfellow because he has been negating what it considers effeminate and deracinated liberalism for nearly two decades. Mr Trump's unconventional willingness to upturn entrenched bipartisan American foreign policy hostility towards Mr Putin and his skepticism about the anti-Russian European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) are driven by regard for Mr Putin as an international standard bearer against liberalism.



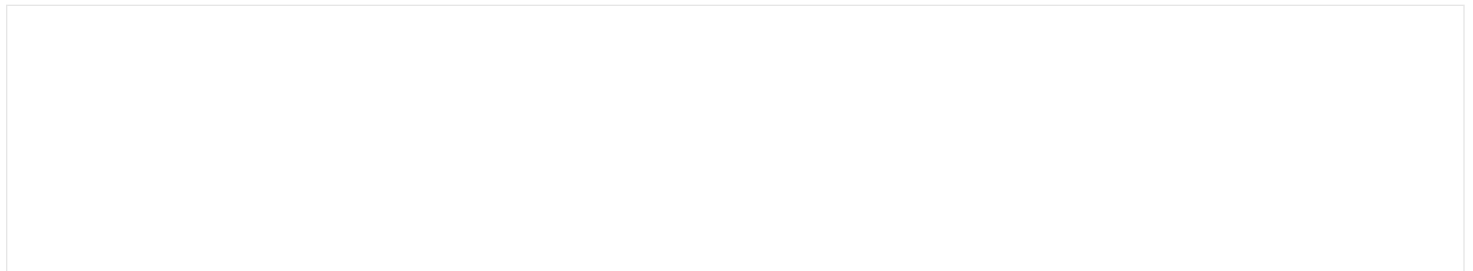
Mr Trump wears admiration of Mr Putin on his sleeve and has praised the latter as "an outstanding and talented personality" who is "so highly respected within his own country and beyond. On Fox News last month, the US President replied to a question about associating with "a killer" like Putin with the retort, "you think our country's so innocent?" It was a remarkably candid public confession by an American President which punctured the carefully constructed liberal myth of the US as an exceptional country that promotes good around the world.

While there are myriad obnoxious aspects to Mr Trump's worldview, he is not wrong in wondering aloud why repairing ties with Russia is so taboo when the US cultivates many authoritarian countries as its allies. He is shredding the liberal consensus that America is somehow morally superior in its international conduct.

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Mr Trump's damaging self-criticism of the US (he has dissed the mainstream American news media as purveyors of "fake news", smeared the US political system as corrupt and rigged, and pledged to "respect the right of all nations to chart their own path") enrages liberals even more to blow a gasket about his suspected Russian affair.

Apart from ideological camaraderie with Mr Putin, Mr Trump and Mr Bannon also believe that Russia's stature as a bulwark against radical jihadist terrorism makes it an ideal partner. Crushing the Islamic State (ISIS) and other Islamist fundamentalists is high on Trump's agenda and he diagnoses that Western liberal revulsion for Mr Putin created fissures in the international community which were exploited by jihadists.



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Conspiracy theorists are circulating rumours of an ulterior reason why Mr Trump loves Mr Putin. The Russian President, painted as a scheming master of the old KGB art of kompromat, is supposed to have collected damaging information about Mr Trump's private life which is being used to blackmail the US President. This version of Mr Trump's attempted rapprochement with Russia is too salacious and as yet unverified to merit serious consideration.

Regardless of the motive, Mr Trump is daring to upend America's identity as the democratic antithesis of a neo-Czarist Russia. He is challenging dogmas in the US foreign policy establishment that Russia is by default an inveterate foe. America's national interests and how they relate to Russia are both being sought to be drastically altered. Hence the liberal ire and nonstop scuttlebutt about how Mr Putin became the de facto master of the White House.

Canards and recriminations over Russia's penetration of the highest echelons of the American government are abetting the institutional disarray and administrative paralysis since Mr Trump took office. And thanks to the Russia factor, the chaos, policy confusion and flip-flops which have marked his tumultuous first months in the White House threaten to become institutionalised as destabilising phenomena for the next four years. The Kremlin boss who adores orderliness must be chuckling at this largely self-inflicted American political mess.

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