

Why Trump won't cancel the Putin summit

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Despite mainstream media denunciations, Trump's base loves his taboo style of diplomacy — and is even warming up to the Russian president.



Russian President Vladimir Putin's GOP popularity has risen over the past two years since President Donald Trump began recasting the Russian leader as a potential U.S. ally who somehow keeps getting wrongly accused of nefarious acts. | Chris McGrath/Getty Images

President Donald Trump's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin has all the makings of a political disaster.

Millions of Americans believe Putin has some sinister influence over Trump. The Justice Department just indicted a dozen Russian military hackers for meddling in the 2016 election. Commentators and congressmen are demanding that Trump cancel Monday's sit-down.

And yet the howls of outrage seem to have made Trump only dig in deeper. To some of the president's allies, the politics of seeing Putin could actually be a positive, at least within Trump's hard-core base, which polls show has been warming up to the Russian leader and which largely writes off questions about Trump's Russia ties as fake news.

That attitude was on clear display Saturday on Fox News, when Trump's top media ally, Sean Hannity — who flew to Helsinki on his private jet last week — made the

on-air case for why Trump's critics are mistaken to believe the canny former KGB man will play Trump for a mark.

"Everyone in the media, they're getting it all wrong," Hannity explained. "He is going to be blunt, brutally honest, just like he was at NATO this week." Hannity cited Trump's June meeting with Kim Jong Un, which he said "critic after critic" had denounced in advance, but which Hannity cast as a success that prompted a halt in North Korea's missile tests.

And as for that damning Friday indictment from special counsel Robert Mueller? "The timing to me was dubious," Hannity said, suggesting that the truly outrageous meddling was that of the Justice Department in Trump's diplomacy.

Trump also cast the media as the enemy in Sunday tweets as he departed for Helsinki, complaining that no matter how many concessions he might get from Putin — including being "given the great city of Moscow" — he would never win due credit.

"Much of the news media is indeed the enemy of the people," he [wrote](#). (It is unclear whether Trump understood that he was echoing a favorite expression of the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.)

There's good reason to think Trump's base is buying it. Mueller's poll numbers have plunged among Republicans in recent months. Meanwhile, in an extraordinary development, Putin's GOP popularity has risen over the past two years since Trump began recasting the Russian leader as a potential U.S. ally who somehow keeps getting wrongly accused of nefarious acts.

Republican voters, after all, revile North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. But Trump managed to spin his taboo Singapore summit with the dictator into an epic spectacle, one that nuclear experts called a farce but left GOP partisans talking Nobel Prize. That Trump seemed to defy a near-unanimous media consensus only added to the satisfaction.

"What his base looks at is a guy who is putting America's interest first," said Trump's former chief White House strategist, Steve Bannon.

Bannon said that hard-core Republicans are receptive to Trump's message that Russia can be a U.S. partner, citing the pragmatic alliance between Washington and Moscow against Nazi Germany.

"The base has so many veterans in it," Bannon said. "They do realize we would have never won World War II without the Russians as allies. This is basic. The Russians are the ones that really broke the back of the German army."

Bannon, who himself has been a sharp critic of Putin in the past, added: "We don't need more enemies. We have enough issues in the world with things like Iran and China and Korea."

Some Trump allies also believe that the cost of several more days of wall-to-wall speculation about whether Trump is somehow under Putin's malign influence will be at least partly balanced by images of the president on the global stage, talking nuclear arms and the Middle East with a top world leader.

That's a look for which every past president has been eager. Another former White House official, Andrew Surabian, compared Monday's tete-a-tete to President Ronald Reagan's historic meetings with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Those two men also sat down together without notetakers or other senior officials in the room, just as Trump and Putin will, to the particular dismay of many Democrats and foreign policy experts who insist Trump will get played.

Conservatives, Surabian said, "are much more open to the idea of dialogue with bad actors than they might have been a decade ago. Unlike with [former President Barack] Obama, no conservative looks at Trump and sees weakness or worries that he's going to be apologizing for America. When they see Trump, just as they did with Reagan before him, they see strength, which in the long run gives the president more latitude with the base to negotiate with adversaries."

Meanwhile Putin himself is growing more popular among conservatives. About 25 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said they held a favorable view of the Russian leader, compared to just 9 percent of Democrats, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. That's not exactly a GOP love affair with the Russian, but it's more than double Putin's standing from 2015. Other recent polling has shown Putin's favorability even higher among Republicans.

But even if Trump's base applauds his defiant diplomacy, it still brings major risks. With his approval rating anchored around 42 percent, according to recent polls, Trump has failed to capitalize on his support in a way that could ensure his reelection. A large chunk of the electorate interprets his flattery of Putin as evidence that he is beholden to the Russian and willing to put U.S. interests at risk.

That's particularly true in the wake of a Mueller indictment that described in clinical detail how a group of Russian military intelligence officers spent months infiltrating and stealing data from the Democratic Party and even state election computer servers in 2016.

"The indictments put tremendous pressure on the meeting," said Tom Donilon, a national security adviser to Obama. "The White House should be preparing the actions that the U.S. is going to take against the Russian government for the actions set forth in the indictments and not having the president sit down with Putin only to hear the same old false denials."

Donilon added: "If the president has the meeting and continues to give Putin a pass, he will have pitted himself against the entirety of the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement services."

It's not clear whether Trump's base takes seriously anything Mueller produces. On Saturday, Hannity scoffed that the timing of the indictment was "just to get the name Russia in the [media] mix" before the Putin summit, and noted for good measure that the hacking had occurred on Obama's watch.

Trump himself has shown little concern about the latest revelations, maintaining his bullish tone about dealing with Putin.

"I think we could probably get along very well," he told British television host Piers Morgan aboard Air Force One on Friday. "Somebody said, 'Are you friends or enemies?' I said, 'Well, it's too early to say but right now,'" Trump said, adding: "[T]o get along with Russia and China and all of these other places ... that's a good thing, not a bad thing. That's a really good thing."

Experts remained confused about what Trump's goal is when he says he wants to start a dialogue and "get along" with Putin.

"It's never been too clear what that means," said Stephen Sestanovich, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Does he mean just ignoring differences? Does he mean resolving or overcoming them in a way that's advantageous for the U.S., or that's advantageous to Russia?"

Hannity, for his part, is untroubled by such questions. The occasion of the summit itself, he said, is "a real win," and a chance for "adult conversation and open dialogue."

"There's no downside here," he declared, before abruptly changing the subject to Hillary Clinton's emails.

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