

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Trump meets Russia's top diplomat amid scrap over election interference

By **John Hudson** and **Anne Gearan**

Dec. 10, 2019 at 7:33 p.m. EST

President Trump met with Russia's top diplomat in the Oval Office on Tuesday, creating a dramatic contrast as House Democrats unveiled articles of impeachment against him for his actions in Ukraine, an ally fending off a Russian-backed insurrection.

After the meeting, Trump said he warned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov not to interfere in U.S. elections and urged a resolution to the Moscow's conflict with Ukraine, the White House said.

But later in the day, Lavrov only suggested that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo raised the issue during their separate meeting at the State Department, Lavrov told reporters at the Russian Embassy.

The two diplomats clashed during their bilateral meeting when the veteran Russian diplomat denied any evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Pompeo declared that interference had happened and "it's unacceptable."

**Get exclusive analysis on the most important global story of the day,  
in your inbox**



AD

Trump later tweeted a picture of himself grinning alongside Lavrov in the Oval Office that recalled one the Russians released following Lavrov's 2017 visit.

“Just had a very good meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and representatives of Russia. Discussed many items including Trade, Iran, North Korea, INF Treaty, Nuclear Arms Control, and Election Meddling. Look forward to continuing our dialogue in the near future!” Trump wrote, using a different transliteration of the diplomat's name.

Trump has repeatedly questioned the findings of U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the 2016 election to help Trump and harm his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. He has also given credence to a baseless conspiracy theory that Ukraine, which is fighting an irregular war with Russia, had interfered in 2016 on behalf of Clinton.

AD

Lavrov's invitation to Washington came as House Democrats unveiled two articles of impeachment against Trump over his efforts to pressure Ukraine to investigate his political rivals.

It also came one day after a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Paris, where the two leaders agreed to implement a "full and comprehensive" cease-fire in eastern Ukraine by the end of the year.

Some Trump administration critics said the White House should have invited Zelensky to Washington instead of granting Lavrov an Oval Office visit.

The former U.S. ambassador to Moscow in the Obama administration, Michael McFaul, said he hoped the "horrible symbolism" of Lavrov's invitation was "just a mistake and not on purpose."

AD

The United States is the principal backer of Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, but Zelensky entered the negotiating session with Russia weakened by revelations that Trump held up military aid and withheld a White House meeting with Zelensky. Those actions are now the basis for the impeachment charge that Trump abused his office for personal gain.

The White House statement said only that Trump urged Russia to resolve the conflict. The statement made no mention of Crimea, the region of Ukraine that Russia annexed in 2014.

Trump did not respond to questions about the Lavrov meeting when he spoke to reporters as he left White House for an evening political rally in Pennsylvania.

AD

At a news conference at the State Department, Pompeo and Lavrov both stated their support for an improvement in U.S.-Russia relations despite broad disagreement between the two powers on an array of issues from Venezuela to Syria to Ukraine.

Pompeo said that the bilateral relationship is “complicated” but that the two countries discussed arms control issues and made progress on “economic” cooperation that would be announced “before too terribly long.”

Pompeo said he conveyed to Lavrov that the United States will not tolerate Russian interference in U.S. elections. “I was clear — it’s unacceptable,” he said.

Lavrov said Russia has demanded that the United States provide evidence of election interference, but when asked by a reporter why he doesn’t simply “read the Mueller report,” Lavrov dismissed the suggestion.

AD

“We read it. There is no proof of any collusion,” he said, speaking through an interpreter.

While special counsel Robert S. Mueller III did not establish a conspiracy between Russia and members of the Trump campaign, his office issued an indictment of 12 Russian intelligence officers for the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign.

In response to Lavrov’s calls for more evidence, Pompeo said this was unnecessary.

“We think we’ve shared plenty of facts to show what happened in the 2016 election with our Russian counterparts. We don’t think there’s any mistake about what really transpired there,” he said.

Pompeo also said he raised the issue of Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine detained by Moscow on spying charges since 2018.

AD

Lavrov said that an investigation into Whelan finished in September and that the matter was making its way through the courts. He suggested concerns about Whelan’s health were not credible.

“We are acting in full compliance with our laws and with the international norms that can be applied in this case,” he said.

He also expressed an interest in renewing the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, known as New START, but said Moscow has not received a proposal from the United States.

Pompeo expressed his desire to include China in the arms talks with Russia, even though Beijing has said that it will not participate given that Moscow and Washington have significantly larger nuclear arsenals. Lavrov noted China's concerns but said Russia is open to a trilateral arrangement.

AD

China figured prominently in the White House meeting that followed, which Pompeo also attended. Trump advocated for global arms control involving the United States, Russia and China, the White House summary said. Trump also “reiterated the need for fair and reciprocal trade with China,” and addressed nuclear weapons concerns in Iran and North Korea, the White House said.

“President Trump welcomed continued engagement with Russia to address areas of mutual concern, including how the United States and Russia can take positive steps with respect to detained citizens,” the White House said.

When asked whether the visit provides bad optics amid the Democrats' impeachment inquiry, White House spokesman Hogan Gidley told Fox Business that the dialogue is “critical to America's well-being.”

AD

“The president talked about and campaigned about having a better relationship with Russia. So did the Democrats, for that matter. It’s incumbent on any American president to build better relationships across the globe,” he said.

Lavrov’s visit to Washington in 2017 ended in controversy after the Russian Embassy in Washington released images of him and other U.S. officials smiling and shaking hands in the Oval Office. The Russian delegation was allowed to bring a photographer in the room from the state news agency Tass, while U.S. photojournalists were barred entry to the meeting.

The meeting came a day after Trump fired FBI Director James B. Comey, who was leading the investigation into the Trump campaign’s contacts with Russian officials. Trump reportedly told Lavrov that Comey was “crazy” and a “real nut job.”

U.S. officials later revealed that Trump disclosed highly classified information to Lavrov in the meeting that related to a critical source of intelligence on the Islamic State.





