

Intelligence Officials Sow Discord by Stoking Fear of Russian Election Meddling

By [Dave DeCamp](#)

Global Research, February 25, 2020

Antiwar.com 24 February 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Another presidential election year is upon us, and the intelligence agencies are hard at work stoking fears of Russian meddling. This time it looks like the Russians do not only like the incumbent president but also favor who appears to be the Democratic front-runner, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

On Thursday, *The New York Times* [ran a story titled](#), “Lawmakers Are Warned That Russia Is Meddling to Re-elect Trump.” The story says that on February 13th US lawmakers from the House were briefed by intelligence officials who warned them, “Russia was interfering in the 2020 campaign to try to get President Trump re-elected.”

The story provides little detail into the briefing and gives no evidence to back up the intelligence officials’ claims. It mostly rehashes old claims from the 2016 election, such as Russians are trying to “stir controversy” and “stoke division.” The intelligence officials also said the Russians are looking to interfere with the 2020 Democratic primaries.

It looks like other intelligence officials are already undermining the leaked briefing. [CNN ran a story on Sunday](#) titled “US intelligence briefer appears to have overstated assessment of 2020 Russian interference.” The CNN article reads, “The US intelligence community has assessed that Russia is interfering in the 2020 election and has separately assessed that Russia views Trump as a leader they can work with. But the US does not have evidence that Russia’s interference this cycle is aimed at re-electing Trump, the officials said.”

According to *The Times*, President Trump was upset with acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire for letting the briefing happen, and Republican lawmakers did not agree with the conclusion since Trump has been “tough” on Russia. In his three years in office, Trump certainly has been tough on Russia, and it is hard to believe that Putin would work to reelect such a Russia hawk.

Under Trump, NATO has strengthened and held its [largest war games](#) since the cold war. The Trump administration withdrew from the Reagan-era nuclear arms treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), an arms control agreement that prohibited Russia and the US from developing medium-range nuclear and ballistic missiles. Shortly after tearing up the treaty, the Pentagon began [developing and testing](#) missiles that were banned under the INF.

The Trump Administration might let another nuclear arms treaty lapse. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) limits the number of nuclear warheads that Russia and the US can have deployed. The US does not want to re-sign the treaty and is using the

excuse that it wants to include China in the deal. China's nuclear arsenal is [estimated to be around 300 warheads](#), which is just one-fifth of the amount that Russia and the US are allowed to have deployed under the New START. It makes no sense for China to limit its deployment of nuclear warheads when its arsenal is nothing compared to the other two superpowers. China appears to be a scapegoat for the US to blame if the treaty does not get renewed. Without the New START, there will be nothing limiting the number of nukes the US and Russia can deploy, making the world a much more dangerous place.

Despite all the drama over military aid to Ukraine, Trump never actually delayed it, and the new National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes [\\$300 million in lethal aid to Ukraine](#), \$50 million more than the previous year. The NDAA also calls for mandatory sanctions against any companies working on completing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a natural gas pipeline that connects Russia and Germany. Of all Trump's hawkish policies, his effort to kill the Nord Stream 2 and the pressure he puts on Germany not to buy gas from Russia can do the most damage to Russia's economy.

The policies listed above are just a few examples of Trump's hostility towards Russia. Others include attempting to overthrow Russia's ally in Venezuela, maintaining a troop presence in Syria to "secure the oil," sanctioning Russian officials and businessman, and [much more](#).

Despite all these provocations towards Russia, Trump is still accused of being a "puppet" of Vladimir Putin. No matter how much the president moves the US closer to direct confrontation with Russia, the talking heads and pundits of the mainstream media take superficial examples – like the 2018 Helsinki conference – as proof of Trump's loyalty to Putin. Trump's words are put under a microscope, while his policies that make nuclear war more possible are largely ignored.

The leaked briefing harkens back to an intelligence assessment that came out in January 2017 during the last days of the Obama administration. The assessment concluded that Vladimir Putin himself ordered the election interference to help Trump get elected. At first, [a falsehood spread through the media](#) that all 17 US intelligence agencies agreed with the conclusion. But later testimony from Obama-era intelligence officials revealed the assessment was prepared by hand-picked analysts from the CIA, FBI, and NSA. The assessment offered no evidence for the claim and mostly focused on media coverage of the presidential candidates on Russian state-funded media.

On Friday, *The Washington Post* piled on to the Russia hysteria and [ran a story titled](#) "Bernie Sanders briefed by US officials that Russia is trying to help his campaign." The story says Sanders received a briefing on Russian efforts to boost his campaign. The details are again scant and *The Post* admits that "It is not clear what form that Russian assistance has taken."

The few progressive journalists that have been right on Russiagate all along had the foresight to see how accusations of Russian meddling would ultimately be used to hurt Sanders' campaign. Unfortunately, Sanders did not have that same foresight and frequently played into the Russiagate narrative.

Last week, during a Democratic primary debate in Las Vegas, when criticized for his supporters' behavior on social media, [Sanders pointed the finger at Russia](#). "All of us remember 2016, and what we remember is efforts by Russians and others to try to interfere in our elections and divide us up. I'm not saying that's happening, but it would not shock

me,” Sanders said.

[In comments](#) after *The Post* story was published, Sanders said he was briefed on Russian interference “about a month ago.” Sanders raised the issue with the timing of the story, having been published on the eve of the Nevada caucus. But the story did not slow down Sanders’ momentum in the polls, and he came out the clear victor of the Nevada caucus. Sanders’ victory seemed to rattle the Democratic establishment, and some wild accusations were thrown around during coverage of the caucus.

Political analyst James Carville [appeared on MSNBC](#) as Sanders took an early and substantial lead in Nevada. Carville said, “Right now, it’s about 1:15 Moscow time. This thing is going very well for Vladimir Putin. I promise you. He’s probably staying up watching this right now.” What could be played off as a joke was followed up with some serious accusations from Carville, “I don’t think the Sanders campaign in any way is collusion or collaboration. I think they don’t like this story, but the story is a fact, and the reason that the story is a fact is Putin is doing everything that he can to help Trump, including trying to get Sanders the Democratic nomination.”

This delusional attitude about the Russians rigging the Democratic primary is underpinned by claims of meddling from the 2016 election. Central to [Robert Mueller’s claim](#) that Russia engaged in “multiple, systematic efforts to interfere in our election” is the St. Petersburg based company, the Internet Research Agency (IRA).

The IRA is accused of running a troll farm that sought to interfere in the 2016 election in favor of Trump over Hillary Clinton. Mueller failed to tie the IRA directly to the Kremlin, and further research into their social media campaign shows most of the posts had nothing to do with the election. A [study on the IRA](#) by the firm New Knowledge found just “11 percent” of the IRA’s content “was related to the election.”

Many believe the Russian government is responsible for hacking the DNC email server and providing the emails to WikiLeaks. But there are many holes in Mueller’s story to support this claim. And WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange – who Mueller did not interview – [has said](#) the Russian government was not the source of the emails.

Regardless of who leaked the DNC emails to WikiLeaks, they show that DNC leadership had a clear bias against Bernie Sanders back in 2016. The emails’ contents were never disputed, and Democratic voters had every right to see the corruption within the DNC. With the release of the DNC emails, and later the Podesta emails, the American people were able to make a more informed choice in the presidential election. This type of transparency provided by WikiLeaks would be celebrated in a healthy democracy, not portrayed as the work of a foreign power.

Sanders would be wise to keep a watchful eye on how the DNC operates over the next few months. The debacle that was the Iowa caucus shows the Democrats can “stoke division” and “stir controversy” just fine on their own.

These claims of Russian meddling will continue throughout the election season. President Trump’s defense that he is “tough” on Russia is nothing to be proud of, but that is inevitably where these accusations lead. Trump is encouraged to be more hawkish towards Russia in an effort to quiet the claims of Putin’s preference for him. And if Bernie Sanders plays into this narrative now, can we believe that he will make any real foreign policy change towards

Russia if he gets the nomination and beats Trump?

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Dave DeCamp is assistant editor at Antiwar.com and a freelance journalist based in Brooklyn NY, focusing on US foreign policy and wars. He is on Twitter at [@decampdave](https://twitter.com/decampdave).

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