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ALLEGED RUSSIAN HACKING DURING THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A POLITICAL WITCH HUNT OR RUSSIAN SUBVERSION?

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The 58th quadrennial U.S. presidential election of 2016 was 'different' in more than one way than many previously held U.S. presidential elections. In the past, much of the intense political drama - an intrinsic appendage of any democratic election- took place behind the closed doors, but in 2016 every aspect of presidential election played out in the mainstream media or on the Internet. The Republicans sprang a surprise by nominating a candidate Donald Trump, a shrewd and successful businessman who was politically naive and inexperienced. Pitted against a candidate, far more experienced in political experience, Donald Trump demonstrated an approach to campaigning for president that had no precedence in American political history. During the campaign, the stories of complex intrigues and political machinations featured incessantly on television, in the print media and on the Internet.

The seismic *political tremor* caused by the *surprise win of Donald Trump* in the Presidential election in November 2016 created ripples across the length and breadth of the U.S. When the Americans thought nothing could now surprise them came the shocking revelation that the Russians, under direct orders from the Russian President Vladimir Putin, tried to influence the campaign. It was alleged that Russia tried to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Democratic candidate Secretary Clinton and sabotage her prospects of electability and potential presidency.¹ This speculative assertion gained credence as a possible Russian recourse to keep Donald Trump at the helm of the most powerful nation, owing to Trump's stated policy to work with Russia and *Trump's* pro-Kremlin rhetoric. Besides, it has been reported that Mr. Trump has business ties to Russia and Russian financial



interests was closely linked with successful presidential run of Mr. Trump

The whole Russian operation to influence the presidential champagne and to undercut Secretary Clinton's legitimacy was carefully orchestrated well in advance. On the eve of the Democratic National Convention on July 22, 2016, a collection of emails of Democratic National Committee (DNC), the governing body of the U.S. Democratic Party was published by WikiLeaks. The leaked collection included emails from key staff members of DNC from January 2015 to May 2016, to chalk out a strategy to contain Bernie Sanders' popularity and to secure Hillary Clinton candidacy as Democratic presidential nominee.² WikiLeaks did not reveal the source of information; however a hacker using the moniker "Guccifer 2.0" claimed responsibility for the attack. According to leading U.S. cyber security firms, the self-styled hacker Guccifer 2.0 is not a single operator but a loose group of Russian cybercriminals designated "Fancy Bear" and "Cozy Bear". Security firm Threat Connect, after comprehensive investigation, reported that Guccifer 2.0 was using the Russia-based Elite VPN service to communicate and leak documents directly with the media.³ The rumour mills were abuzz with stories that the whole episode was orchestrated by Kremlin, as part of its grand plan to facilitate Mr. Donald Trump accession to the White House.⁴ It has also been reported that "the Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation" was

breached by hackers suspected to have strong Russian connections.⁵

Amid the growing clamour for an investigation from congressional Democrats for possible Russian hacking in U.S. election, on 09 December, 2016, then President Obama ordered U.S. intelligence to review evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. It was ironical that the intelligence agencies that were entrusted with the responsibility of undertaking investigation now report to President Trump, considered to the main beneficiary of Russian meddling in U.S. election.⁶ The outgoing president even warned that U.S. would retaliate for Russian cyber attacks during the presidential election at a time and place of U.S. choosing.⁷ On 29 Dec 16, the Obama administration announced that as a retaliatory measure, there would be sweeping new sanctions against Russia that included the expulsion of 35 Russians.⁸ In a statement, then President Obama said that he had issued an executive order that provides additional authority for responding to certain cyber activity that seeks to interfere with or undermine U.S. election processes and institutions, or those of U.S. allies or partners.⁹

The Kremlin was quick to dismiss such allegations as baseless, unsubstantiated and amateurish and described such claims as part of a political witch-hunt.¹⁰ Speaking disparagingly of the US intelligence agencies Russia termed

these series of accusations as turning in a full-on witch-hunt. *Adding more twists and turns in the plot is the claim of existence of a dossier* which was compiled by former MI6 agent, Christopher Steele. It was alleged that Mr. Trump had potentially been compromised by the Russians during a 2013 trip to Moscow for the Miss Universe competition. *Again*, Russian president dismissed alleged links between Mr. Trump and Moscow and said that claims made in the dossier about salacious by Mr. Trump were obviously fake.

The alleged Russian intrusions into American political system by leveraging cyberspace and its malafide manipulations to influence the outcome of presidential election has started a new debate on rules of engagement in the cyber arena. Some have gone so far as to say that the U.S. is being paid back in the same coin that it used against foreign governments.

It is an open secret that state supported, enabled, sponsored, and aided cyber operations are perpetuated across national borders and lack of consciously agreed-upon behavioural guidelines in cyber space has led to consequences – intentional and unintended – for civil societies and nations. Besides, the allegation against Russia meddling in American internal affairs and democracy is reminiscent of cold war rhetoric. An interesting twist was added to the story when in July 2016, Mr. Trump called upon Russians to find emails, which were supposedly

deleted by Hillary Clinton from her family's private email server during her tenure as United States Secretary of State, and said “Russia, if you're listening, I hope you'll be able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.” Within the U.S., the outrage was palpable as the call was construed as an open invitation to meddle in U.S. internal affairs. Later Mr. Trump said that he merely wanted Russians to turn over the emails to the FBI if they had them.¹¹ The nostalgic sentiments that some Russian officials continue to hold for the Cold War saw the U.S. discomfiture over these developments as assertion of Russia's resurgent political might.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹U.S. Office of Director of National Intelligence, Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections, ICA 2017-01D, January 06, 2017, p. 5.

²Ibid, p. 2.

³Threatconnect Research Team, Guccifer 2.0: All Roads Lead to Russia, *Threat Connect*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.threatconnect.com/blog/guccifer-2-all-roads-lead-russia/>, accessed 20 Jan 2017.

⁴Ellen Nakashima, Is there a Russian master plan to install Trump in the White House? Some intelligence officials are skeptical, *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2016.

⁵ Michael Riley and Jordan Robertson, Clinton Foundation Said to Be Breached by Russian Hackers, *Bloomberg*, June 23, 2016.

⁶Spencer Ackerman and David Smith, Barack Obama orders 'full review' of possible Russian hacking in US election, *The Guardian*, December 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/09/us-election-hacking-russia-barack-obama-review>, accessed 20 Jan 2017.

⁷ Julian Borger, Barack Obama promises retaliation against Russia over hacking during US election, *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/16/obama-retaliation-russia-hacking-us-election>, accessed 20 Jan 2017.

⁸ Lauren Gambino, Sabrina Siddiqui and Shaun Walker, Obama expels 35 Russian diplomats in retaliation for US election hacking, *The Guardian*, December 30, 2016, <https://thevotingnews.com/obama-expels-35-russian-diplomats-as-part-of-sanctions-for-us-election-hacking-the-guardian/>, accessed 20 Jan 2017.

⁹bid.

¹⁰Hyacinth Mascarenhas, Russia 'tired' of US election hacking claims, slams intelligence report as 'baseless and amateurish', *International Business Times*, January 10, 2017

¹¹Mansur Mirovalev, Unleashing torrent of Cold War rhetoric, Russia denies hacking DNC, *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2016.

