

TRUMP-PUTIN SUMMIT

Five key takeaways

At their much-anticipated presidential summit, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin were at pains to talk up a reconciliation in fractured ties between the United States and Russia. But Trump's failure to condemn the Kremlin's alleged role in directing a campaign of manipulation in the US elections will dominate coverage in Washington, where it triggered outrage. Here are five takeaways from the news conference that followed their first summit, in the Finnish capital Helsinki:

MEDDLING, MOI?

Russia did not meddle in the 2016 elections, Putin said, rejecting the verdict of US intelligence chiefs that Moscow hacked the Democrats' emails and leaked them to help propel Trump to the White House. Trump appeared to buy the denial, to the outrage of opponents and even some Republicans back home, despite his intelligence advice and a widening probe by US special counsel Robert Mueller that indicted 12 alleged Russian agents last week. Instead, Trump welcomed an offer by Putin for US agents to indirectly grill the indicted Russians by submitting their questions to Russian officials. Both leaders rejected any talk of pre-election collusion, and Putin also dismissed the idea that his government holds compromising material on Trump.



FRESH START TO TIES, AGAIN

As secretary of state, Trump's 2016 opponent Hillary Clinton famously pressed a large button marked "reset" to denote a fresh start to ties with Russia. Relations, however, swiftly lurched from bad to worse. This time, according to Trump and Putin, it's different. The summit was "only the beginning", the US president said. "Our relationship has never been worse than it is now. However, that changed as of about four hours ago."

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Heading into the summit, Trump emphasised his wish to tackle a developing race between the two countries to modernise their nuclear arsenals. Nothing specific emerged, but Putin said it was "necessary to work together to interact on the disarmament agenda", including a return to existing treaties to limit long-range and intermediate nuclear forces. For his part, Trump said nuclear proliferation was "one of the most critical challenges facing humanity" while lauding his own role in bringing North Korea to the table. Nothing concrete emerged from the leaders.

GLOBAL HOTSPOTS

Trump and Putin appear to have come to some kind of arrangement to work together and with Israel to support a ceasefire in southern Syria, suggesting that Washington is backing off its demand that Moscow's ally Bashar al-Assad step down. They talked about meaningful steps without specifying them. Putin said they had agreed to differ on Iran, Ukraine.

FOOTBALL

After Trump congratulated Putin on the successful staging of the World Cup in Russia, the Kremlin boss tossed him a tournament football in a slightly strained attempt to lighten the mood after a barrage of questions about Syria and meddling. Trump cheerfully said he hoped US would host an equally successful competition, and promised to give the ball to his 12-year-old son Barron.

SOURCE: AFP

Pressure mounts on 'isolated Trump'

Back in Washington, US president faces bipartisan call to reverse course on Russia

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump found himself isolated and under pressure to reverse course Tuesday after publicly challenging the US intelligence conclusion that Russia meddled in the 2016 election during his face-to-face with Vladimir Putin.

At his inaugural summit with the Russian president in Finland, Trump appeared to accept at face value the strongman's denial that Moscow interfered in a bid to undermine his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton -- a stance that triggered bipartisan outrage at home.

Back in Washington, Trump sounded a defensive note, insisting his meeting with Putin had been "even better" than his one last week with traditional allies Nato -- a testy gathering seen as having badly strained trans-Atlantic ties.

But the US president has found precious little support for his failure to confront Putin, and faced calls even from allies to change tack.

"He has to reverse course immediately and he's gotta get out there as soon as possible before the concrete starts to set on this," former White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci said on CNN.

"Loyalty right now requires you to tell the truth and sit with him and explain to him the optics of the situation, why the optics are bad, the strategy in terms of trying to get along with Vladimir Putin and deploying a strategy of going against the intelligence agency is very bad," Scaramucci said.

Former House speaker Gingrich and longtime Trump ally Newt Gingrich put it yet more bluntly.

"President Trump must clarify his state-



ments in Helsinki on our intelligence system and Putin," he tweeted as Trump headed home from Helsinki. "It is the most serious mistake of his presidency and must be corrected -- immediately."

Trump's performance at the summit has even come under fire from the hosts at Fox News, usually a reliable defender of the president.

"No negotiation is worth throwing your own people and country under the bus," Fox anchor and Fox & Friends co-host Abby Huntsman wrote on Twitter.

Trump and Putin met for two hours in Helsinki on Monday with only their interpreters present, then held a joint press conference.

Standing alongside the Kremlin boss,

Trump acknowledged that his intelligence chiefs believe Russia hacked and leaked Democrats' emails containing politically damaging information about his rival Hillary Clinton in 2016.

But, insisting he had won the race fair and square, the Republican said: "I have President Putin, he just said it is not Russia. I will say this: I don't see any reason why it would be."

The US leader insisted that his counterpart had delivered a "powerful" denial of any Russian manipulation, and that the investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller, into Russian meddling and possible collusion with the Trump campaign, was proving a "disaster" for the United

States.

Mueller's investigation has increasingly put pressure on the White House, and Trump -- who regards it as an attack on the legitimacy of his presidency -- has dubbed it a "witch hunt."

But the investigation continues to progress, resulting in the indictment of 12 Russian military intelligence agents on Friday -- timing that was embarrassing in light of the upcoming summit.

While Trump has faced intense criticism over Helsinki, he is not entirely without defenders. Republican Senator Rand Paul has given a series of interviews supporting Trump's stance towards Putin, and berating his critics as biased against the president.

"I think the president did a good thing by meeting with Putin and I think it's a mistake for people to try to turn this into a partisan escapade," Paul said on CBS.

Paul's efforts drew praise from Trump, who tweeted: "Thank you @RandPaul, you really get it!"

But the bipartisan consensus has been broadly hostile to Trump's stance -- as the top Republican on Congress, House Speaker Paul Ryan made clear once more at a press conference Tuesday on Capitol Hill.

"We stand by our Nato allies and all those countries who are facing Russia aggression," Ryan said. "Vladimir Putin does not share our interests, Vladimir Putin does not share our values."

"Russia did meddle with our elections. Not only did Russia meddle with our elections, they are doing it around the world," he said.

"Russia is trying to undermine democracy itself."

'CONSPIRACY TO INFLUENCE US POLITICS'

Russian agent arrested

AFP, Washington

A 29-year-old Russian woman has been arrested for conspiring to influence US politics by cultivating ties with political groups including the National Rifle Association, the powerful gun rights lobby.

Maria Butina, whose name is sometimes spelled Maria, was arrested in Washington on Sunday and appeared in court on Monday, the Justice Department said.

Butina was charged with conspiring to act as an agent of Russia "by developing relationships with US persons and infiltrating organizations having influence in American politics," it said in a statement.

Her arrest was announced as President Donald Trump flew back from Helsinki to Washington, following an inaugural summit with Vladimir Putin at which he was accused of failing to stand up to the Russian leader over electoral meddling.

The Justice Department said Butina had broken US law by not disclosing to US authorities that she was acting on behalf of the Russian government.

Butina had close ties to a "Russian official" who was not identified in the charging documents but who has been widely reported to be a Russian politician named Alexander Torshin, it said.

An ally of Russian leader Putin, Torshin is currently a senior official with Russia's central bank and a former top Russian lawmaker. He is one of a number of senior Russian officials subject to US sanctions.

The Justice Department said Butina carried out her activities in the United States at the direction of the "Russian official."

It said Butina and the official sought to develop relationships with US politicians to create "back channel" lines of communications that could be "used by the Russian Federation to penetrate the US national decision-making apparatus."



Mueller probe shouldn't derail US-Russia ties: Putin

AFP, Washington

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday described the probe by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Moscow's election meddling as "political games" that should not be permitted to interfere with US-Russia relations.

Asked in a Fox News interview about Mueller's indictment Friday of 12 Russian intelligence agents for hacking Democratic Party computers in 2016, just three days before his summit with President Donald Trump, Putin said it was not his concern, but rather part of an "internal political struggle."

"I'm not interested in this issue a single bit," he said, speaking through a translator. "It's the internal political games of the United States."

"Don't make the relationship between Russia and the United States, don't hold it hostage of this internal political struggle,"

Putin said.

Putin was speaking shortly after his summit with Trump in Helsinki, Finland on Monday, where the question of alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential race loomed large.

Trump has repeatedly branded the Mueller probe a "witch hunt."

And in a press conference Monday with Putin at his side, Trump dismissed his own intelligence chiefs' conclusion that Putin himself oversaw the effort to damage Trump's Democratic election rival Hillary Clinton.

Putin suggested Monday that Mueller's appointment as an independent prosecutor to pursue the investigation lacks legitimacy.

"It's quite clear to me that this is just an internal political struggle and it's nothing to be proud of for American democracy to use such dirty methods and political rivalry," Putin told Fox.



Members of the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms rescue a woman in the Mediterranean open sea about 85 miles off the Libyan coast, yesterday. So far this year, 50,872 migrants have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe -- less than half the number that made the treacherous journey during the same period of 2017, according to the UN migration agency.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran lodges complaint against US over renewed sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iran has lodged a complaint with the International Court of Justice against the United States' reimposition of sanctions, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

The complaint was registered the previous day, spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said on the ministry's website.

The goal is "to hold (the) US accountable for its unlawful re-imposition of unilateral sanctions," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote on Twitter.

"Iran is committed to the rule of law in the face of US contempt for diplomacy and legal obligations. It's imperative to counter its habit of violating (international) law," he added.

The complaint came in response to Washington's decision in May to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions on Iran.

Tehran says the action violates international obligations, including the 1955 US-Iran Treaty of Amity -- an agreement signed well before Iran's 1979 revolution, but which

is still invoked in ongoing legal battles.

Iran and the US have not had diplomatic relations since 1980, when American embassy officials were held hostage in Tehran.

Nuclear-related sanctions will be reimposed by Washington in two phases in August and November, seeking to bar European and other foreign companies from doing business with Iran and blocking its oil sales abroad.

Iran and the other signatories to the 2015 agreement have been scrambling to preserve the limited trade deals they were able to secure since it was signed.

Zarif addressed world diplomats and Iranian businessmen at a lavish Tehran hotel on Monday night, in a meeting designed as a show of continued mutual support in the face of US aggression.

"This administration in the United States doesn't know how to behave towards the world... it breaks international treaties as a tool. It is necessary to put a stop to this behaviour," Zarif said.

My party will rule 'forever'

Says Tanzania president

AFP, Nairobi

Tanzania's President John Magufuli who has come under fire for his authoritarian leadership style has vowed that his ruling party will be "in power forever, for eternity".

In a speech broadcast on radio and television late Monday, Magufuli said that opponents of his Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party would "always have problems".

His remark is the latest in a string of controversial comments that included a suggestion over the weekend that prisoners be made to work "day and night" and receive kicks if they are lazy.

"The CCM is here and will continue to be here -- forever. Members of the CCM, you can walk with your heads held high. There is no alternative to the CCM," said Magufuli during a ground breaking ceremony for a new party training centre being built in Kibaha, outside the economic capital Dar es Salaam.

Magufuli, who came to power in 2015, has previously angered rights groups with his campaigns against homosexuality and calls to bar pregnant girls from schools.



US judge suspends deportation of reunited migrant families

AFP, Los Angeles

A federal judge in San Diego issued an order on Monday barring officials from deporting newly reunited immigrant families for up to one week.

District Judge Dana Sabraw was responding to papers filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) expressing concern that the government planned to carry out quick deportations.

Attorneys said newly reunited families should be given time to talk through whether they plan to seek asylum and mull over the possible ramifications for both the parents and the children.

Sabraw's order stays in place through July 23, giving the federal government one week to respond to the ACLU's concerns.

"The judge once again made clear that the government unconstitutionally took these children away and now must do everything in its power to reunite them safely and by the deadline," Lee Gelernt, of the ACLU's Immigrants' Rights Project, said in a statement.

Sabraw earlier gave officials a July 26 deadline to return children over age five who were separated from their families at the border with Mexico.

The estimated number of children separated at the border under the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" policy has fluctuated, but as many as 3,000 children are believed to have been affected.

Senior administration figures, from Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen and Attorney General Jeff Sessions to the president himself, have been heavily criticized for lying or giving otherwise misleading statements on child separation.

These have included blaming the policy on the Democrats, wrongly implying that illegal immigrants are more violent than the US population, giving a false perception of the size of the problem and misappropriating Christian dogma to justify the policy.

The federal government missed a July 10 deadline imposed by Sabraw for the reunification of children under age five with their families.

BREXIT ROW



back on her word that Britain will not be part of any customs union after leaving the EU -- something that would have infuriated the pro-Brexit wing of her party.

However, the government did suffer an unexpected defeat on a separate amendment which means they will now be required to seek to secure an agreement that allows Britain to have continued participation in the European medicines regulatory framework.

The Trade Bill is focused on convert-

ing trade deals between the EU and third countries into bilateral deals with Britain. It is a technical bill and was not originally intended to define new trade policy.

Meanwhile, Britain's official Brexit campaign, Vote Leave, has been fined and reported to the police for breaking spending rules in the 2016 EU membership referendum, boosting calls for a second vote.

The Electoral Commission regulator said the winning side in the referendum had worked together with a smaller pro-Brexit group called BeLeave to get around rules limiting its campaign spending.

Vote Leave was fined £61,000 and BeLeave founder Darren Grimes, a fashion student, was fined £20,000 -- the maximum levy for an individual.

The report prompted angry questions in parliament, calls for the referendum to be annulled or re-run and claims that the entire Brexit process was now dubious.