

FEBRUARY 09, 2017

CORKER OPENING STATEMENT AT HEARING ON "THE UNITED STATES, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD"

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Hearing: "The United States, The Russian Federation and the Challenges Ahead"

February 9, 2017

U.S. Senator Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), Chairman

Corker Opening Statement at Hearing on Broad Challenges Facing U.S. Pol...



Since November of last year, this committee has tried to get witnesses from the prior administration to testify about a wide range of issues currently challenging the United States-Russian relationship.

While the Obama administration did make officials available for classified briefings, they would not allow anyone to speak publicly about the strategic issues driving this relationship. By the way, that is not a criticism. It is an observation, and I know that they wanted to get everybody on the same page relative to things that led up to the election.

But the point is it's taken us a while to have a Russia hearing and we're glad to be able to do that today.

At the same time, the Trump administration continues the process of nominating its own people and establishing its own priorities, so [there are] not a lot of people in the Trump administration to testify today either.

This committee turns to the expertise of previous government servants with deep knowledge of Russia. And I'm going to welcome you properly in a moment but I just wanted to say thank you so much for being here today.

Specifically, we have asked them here to discuss the overall state of our bilateral relationship and the elements of a successful strategy to defend American interests.

Russia possesses not only the second most powerful military in the world – behind the United States in everything except nuclear weapons – but also a seat on the United Nations Security Council, where their veto can complicate much of what we try to do in the world.

Just to amplify and say, the U.N. Security Council was set up to create stability around the world and those permanent members were put there because they were seen as a stabilizing force. Now Russia is a member of this. Obviously will continue to be. And has very much become a destabilizing force and has kept us from doing things around the world in unison that should be done.

So, today we must discuss the broad spectrum of issues that our country has with the Russian Federation and its behavior in recent years.

As we have heard multiple times in this room, Russia violated the Budapest Memorandum when it invaded Ukraine – where it continues to occupy stolen land and enable combat operations that kill innocent civilians.

Just another report out recently regarding what is happening in Eastern Ukraine, the depravity that people are dealing with there. Again, solely by the Russians supporting the rebels there.

I appreciated the comments last week from our new ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, who strongly condemned Russia’s role in the recent escalation of violence in Eastern Ukraine and insisted U.S. sanctions over Crimea would remain in place. I would note communications staff from the White House verified that was the administration’s position.

As the New York Times reported in October of last year, Russia has also developed ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) that violate the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty – giving them a serious military advantage at the expense of international law. At some point, you wonder what the purpose is of a treaty that we know Russia has violated and in essence is in some ways abrogating.

As we have seen on our own televisions and smartphones, Russia has joined the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime – participating in the destruction of hospitals and schools and the targeting of civilians. The resulting instability contributed to the migration crisis and terror threat that has gripped Europe.

I know General Breedlove has been there seven times since his retirement in May – not much of a retirement, I might add – but but I know you will be able to shed light on that.

These are only a few examples of ways in which Russian actions directly conflict with American interests. The entire list is longer, including the deployment of Russian forces into Georgia and Moldova; unprecedented efforts to interfere in our elections; and the increasingly hostile approach that the Russian government has taken to silence opposition politicians, a free and independent press, and civil society, in general.

The sudden hospitalization of pro-democracy advocate Vladimir Kara-Murza, who testified here not long ago and continues to fight for his life, stands as a stark reminder of the risks borne by Russians when they speak out against an increasingly autocratic regime.

Similarly, the Russian courts’ treatment of Aleksei Navalny begs questions about the democratic process under Putin.

How we deal with Russia is going to be one of the major projects for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and is something for which he is ideally suited given his deep relationships and understanding of the geostrategic issues at play.

Secretary Tillerson knows the dangers posed by Russia and the importance of restoring a credible U.S. deterrent so Moscow no longer exploits what it perceives as American weakness.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how to address these problems in a way that moves our approach to Russia in the right direction.

Thank you.

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