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# Tillerson says Trump 'pressed' Putin on Russia's hacking. But it doesn't sound like he pressed very hard.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spoke about the two-hour meeting between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 7. (The Washington Post)

By **Aaron Blake**

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The big question heading into Friday's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G-20 summit was whether President Trump would confront him about Russian hacking in the 2016 election.

The answer was a resounding *maybe*. It depends, apparently, on how loosely you define "confront."

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who was present at the meeting, said afterward that Trump did indeed “press” Putin on Russian interference at multiple junctures.

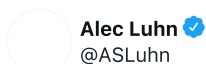
“The president opened his meeting with President Putin by raising the concerns of the American people regarding Russian interference in the 2016 election,” Tillerson told reporters. “They had a very robust and lengthy exchange on the subject. The president pressed President Putin on more than one occasion regarding Russian involvement.”

Okay. Sounds pretty serious.

But then Tillerson said repeatedly that the meeting was about the future and not the past. “But I think what the two presidents — I think rightly — focused on is how we move forward,” he said. Later, he would add that Putin's contention that Russian didn't hack represented an “intractable disagreement” and said, “There was not a lot of re-litigating things from the past.”

That sure doesn't sound like a ton of pressing. Indeed, it kind of sounds like Trump did bring it up, Putin denied it, and then they largely “moved forward” without “re-litigating” the past. Tillerson's comments sure seem to be accepting of the fact that there was no progress on that front.

Which is pretty much how Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described it. In a separate briefing from Tillerson's, Lavrov said that Trump accepted Putin's explanation that Russia didn't hack and even said Trump talked about how people in the United States were “exaggerating” the situation.

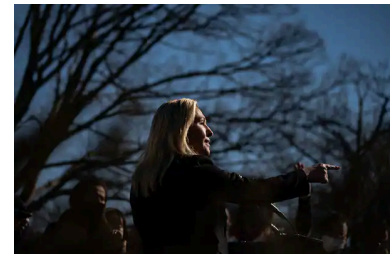


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For those wanting Trump to bring up election hack, he has:  
He reportedly told Putin many in US are "exaggerating" it

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“President Trump said that this campaign [against Russia] has already acquired a rather strange character, because for many months these accusations have sounded, but not a single fact has been produced,” Lavrov said, according to The Washington Post's David Filipov.

The White House is quibbling — anonymously — with the idea that Trump accepted Putin's denial. And it certainly wouldn't be out of character for Lavrov and Russia to mislead; they have incentive to do so.

But at this point, the White House and Trump haven't really given us much reason to doubt that Trump didn't really press all that hard. Tillerson's comments are particularly telling, with all the talk about moving forward and not “re-litigating” the past. Those words were chosen for a reason, and if they weren't, it's a really unfortunate choice to have used them.

And more than anything, it's Trump's past public comments that make it difficult to believe that he truly confronted Putin with much vigor. Every time [Trump is asked about](#)

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[this issue, he equivocates, qualifies and deflects](#). He can't just say that he thinks Russia hacked and that it must be dealt with; he has to say that other countries probably hack too, he has to cast doubt upon the intelligence community, and he has to point the finger at President Barack Obama for not doing more. Case in point was Thursday during a news conference with Poland's president, [when he did all of that](#).

Trump has never been firm in his comments about Russian hacking, including at times labeling the whole thing a “hoax” and suggesting that it might have been some kid in his parents' basement rather than the Kremlin. There is basically nothing in the public record that suggests Trump would push back particularly hard if Putin just denied the whole thing. Indeed, that was the same position Trump used to have and almost seems to wish he could have again — if it weren't for all those politicians in both parties who are hugely worried about Russia.

The White House is often asking us to believe that Trump is a different president behind closed doors — that he's a guy who might one day question the intelligence behind the Russia investigation and then the next day hold Putin's feet to the fire on it. But that's asking everyone for a whole lot of suspension of disbelief.

We'll have to see what else comes out about this meeting, but Tillerson's readout of it suggests that Trump pretty much just checked a box and moved on to other things — which perhaps shouldn't surprise any of us.

Maybe Lavrov was lying! But if the Russians are giving an inaccurate account of the meeting, perhaps Trump should say so publicly on this issue of such import. We'll hold our breath.

More than anything, his failure to say much of anything tough publicly suggests that whatever he said behind closed

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doors wasn't so tough either.



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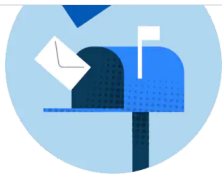


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