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The Issue: Retired Gen. Michael T. Flynn became one of the Trump Administration's first casualties in the conflict between the White House and its domestic critics. President Trump's national security advisor had to step down due to controversy surrounding his communication with Russian contacts. Specifically, Gen. Flynn had telephone conversations with the Russian ambassador in Washington during the transition period. The conversations touched upon the U.S. sanctions against Russia, yet Vice-President Mike Pence initially denied this fact because Gen. Flynn had inaccurately briefed him on the subject. The issue once again focused the spotlight on the Trump Administration's relations with Russia, critics who remain skeptical of the administration's ties to Russia, and the feud between the White House and the mainstream media.

The background: The national security advisor is a unique actor in the American foreign and security policy decision-making process. Theoretically, (s)he is primarily responsible for coordinating the work of the National Security Council at the White House. However, this role has been greatly expanded since the 1960s. The national security advisor also acts as a manager and publicist, as (s)he assures the execution of the President's policies and explains them to the American people when the administration judges it necessary. Moreover, (s)he is stationed in the White House and is in frequent personal contact with the President, and therefore can have a much larger impact on the President's decisions than members of the cabinet who are located outside the Executive's residence, such as the Secretary of State. The predominance of the national security advisor in foreign and security affairs was perhaps most visible during the Nixon Administration when national security advisor Henry Kissinger had secret negotiations in the People's Republic of China without the knowledge of Secretary of State William P. Rogers. The unique position of the national security advisor is further enhanced by the fact that, unlike other relevant actors in foreign and security policy decision-making, his or her appointment does not require confirmation by the Senate. In other words, the national security advisor is a position characterized by the confidentiality and personal trust of the U.S. President. Accordingly, the resignation or dismissal of a national security advisor is no small affair.

In the case of the Trump Administration, relations with Russia have made this issue all the more complicated. The Trump team has been accused of having close Russian ties, and possibly a line of communication with the Kremlin—a perception which Donald J. Trump fostered with his positive gestures toward President Putin during and after the U.S. presidential election. In fact, many consider Gen. Flynn to have a positive approach toward Russia. Accordingly, the Trump Administration has received loud criticism from Capitol Hill on the subject. While traditionally it is the GOP who tends to be more wary and hawkish toward Russia, it is not surprising that this time Democrats have rallied around this position: both House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D) called for a detailed investigation on President

Trump's ties to Russia. However, the Trump Administration received its fair share of criticism from Republicans as well: Senator John McCain (R—an adamant critic of Putin's—called on President Trump to offer a detailed explanation of his policy toward Russia, and stood behind Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R) in criticizing the President for his view that the American and Russian governments are on equal moral grounds. Nevertheless, on the whole, people in the GOP are less enthusiastic to launch a detailed investigation into the subject.

Overall, the ousting of Gen. Flynn theoretically means that the pro-Russian camp within the White House has lost a key player. That said, the Trump Administration itself is actually divided over Russia, with Secretary of Defense (Ret. Marine Gen.) James Mattis questioning the possibility for American-Russian military cooperation, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley condemning Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and calling for its adherence to the Minsk Agreement, which was also emphasized by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Furthermore, shortly after the resignation of Gen. Flynn as national security advisor, White House spokesperson Sean Spicer reiterated that President Trump expects Russia to withdraw from Crimea and to help end the armed conflict in Ukraine. The President, however, also intends to cooperate with Russia on global issues, primarily on the joint fight against ISIS. Although Donald J. Trump claims that several U.S. Presidents did not attempt to start off with a constructive approach toward Moscow, this was actually the initial intention of many of his predecessors. Nonetheless, they ultimately failed to forge friendly relations with Russia—a possibility which President Trump has not explicitly ruled out. In other words, despite the departure of Gen. Flynn or any kind of similar change within the Trump Administration, there is a strong chance that U.S.-Russian relations will follow the status quo, simply because of the parties' respective national interests.

Indeed, while the Flynn-case is indivisible from U.S. foreign and security policy, it is actually rooted in the domestic front. Both Michael T. Flynn and President Trump's Russia policy suffered from the administration's bitter relationship with the media. While Flynn's departure was explained as an issue of trust (or the lack of it), President Trump made it clear that there was nothing wrong with Gen. Flynn's actions vis-à-vis the Russians, "because that's his job," and the President would have directed him to act just as he did. In the President's view, the real issue here is not Russia but the fact that Gen. Flynn's conversations were illegally leaked, and the media and "the people that gave out the information to the press should be ashamed of themselves". Thus the President views some of the media as dishonest and biased against him, and this prejudice hinders foreign and security policy-making. Though the President acknowledged the problem of recent Russian provocations—a spy vessel appeared 30 miles from Connecticut, an armed Russian aircraft once again buzzed over a U.S. destroyer in the Black Sea, and a Russian cruise-missile was recently deployed in violation of the 1987 INF Treaty—he also said that these actions are probably not aimed at testing him but are rather due to Vladimir Putin's assumption that the media disables the U.S. President in making a deal with Russia. The validity of both scenarios remains to be seen, however, it is already without a doubt that the Trump White House identifies at least three actors in international bilateral discussions: the U.S. government, its international counterpart, and the press, with the latter seemingly sitting at the other end of the table.