

THE DIM PHILBY LEAKS

Bloomberg obtained and posted the content of two phone calls showing Steve Witkoff – whom Michael Weiss has dubbed “Dim Philby” – working for Russia’s interests, not US interests. Bloomberg published two transcripts:

- A 5-minute October 14 call between Witkoff and Yuri Ushakov, Putin’s top foreign policy advisor, in which Witkoff tells Ushakov how to pitch Trump on capitulation
- A short October 29 call between Ushakov and Kirill Dmitriev, in which Dmitriev described “informally pass[ing ...] along [Russia’s maximal “piece” plan], making it clear that it’s all informal. And let them do like their own

The transcripts show that Witkoff is a sycophant serving Putin’s interest and that the transcript that Americans have been claiming was their own plan was, as everyone smart insisted, in fact Russia’s plan.

The fall-out of this is yet to be seen. Thus far, Marco Rubio’s efforts to salvage things seems to have bought time.

When Bloomberg posted the transcripts they said they had reached out for comment from the White House. That reference is gone, but now Trump and his flunkies claim these transcripts make Witkoff look strong, rather than culpable. So maybe Trump will just try to barrel through the transcript release and still capitulate to Russia.

I want to consider the logistics of this leak, which could arise from wiretapping (or simply recording) what happened on Ushakov's phone, which is common to both transcripts. It could have come from any of three entities:

- The Russians, who would have ready access to Ushakov's phone and no concern about preserving that access
- Some European intelligence service, which would be endangering a tremendously valuable compromise by releasing this, but might stave off diplomatic catastrophe
- American leakers, possibly at the CIA (which, like Marco Rubio, was excluded from these negotiations)

Bloomberg's story has no byline, which would make it harder for the FBI or anyone else to determine who leaked these materials.

Now consider the effect of the leak. The transcripts make it clear the claims sold to Axios and WSJ – that Jared Kushner wrote this plan – were false. Dmitriev succeeded, as he told Ushakov he would do, in getting the White House to pass off the Russian plan as their own.

If the US forces through this deal, the leak of this transcript makes Russia's complete dominance evident.

Or, if the deal fails because Rubio succeeded in making the deal more acceptable to Ukraine and Europe, this leak may undercut Dmitriev's role in the entire process (indeed, the leak could be an attempt to scapegoat him for a failed plan to get maximal capitulation).

But unless the US understands where the transcripts came from, it makes Witkoff vulnerable. The only obviously targeted phone is Ushakov's. But if they got both sides of this conversation, what else did they get?

We don't know the answers but it's worth remembering something about 2016 to 2017.

Like Witkoff, Mike Flynn used absolutely abysmal operational security when working a back channel to undermine sanctions on Russia. Ultimately, US spies discovered what he had done, after trying to figure out why Putin did nothing in response to US sanctions. But the Russian Embassy pretty clearly knew the phone lines Flynn was calling into were wiretapped. Russia knew that would be exposed, and likely knew that one of several things would happen: they'd have blackmail on Trump because he dealt with Russia before becoming President or, the discovery of Flynn's actions could destabilize the Trump administration as the investigation into his Russia ties in fact did do.

The same could be said for these transcripts.