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## **[Why is the US Congress stalling on further sanctions?](#)**



The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently found that 21 state election systems were targeted by Russian hackers during the 2016 presidential race. Jeh Johnson, a former Homeland Security Secretary and currently an independent analyst, testified during [hearings](#) at the House Intelligence Committee that Russia's interference in American elections was part of a carefully planned plot, unprecedented in scope and scale.

Moreover, DHS cybersecurity official Jeanette Manfra backed Johnson's testimony during hearings in the Senate. However, she emphasized that the hacker attacks had not had a decisive influence on the outcome of the presidential election. She refused, it is worth noting, to inform Senators which exact states were affected by the attacks.

Earlier, the Senate [approved](#) a bill on the enactment of new sanctions against Iran and Russia by an absolute majority. Despite the expansion of restrictions to encompass the energy sphere and banking sector, Senators adopted a special chapter (with only Republicans Mike Lee of Utah and Rand Paul of Kentucky voting against it) which bans the President from lifting sanctions without the approval of Congress. Both Senators believe that the Republicans should not enter into the Democrats' political games as they are seeking revenge against Trump for the defeat of their candidate Hillary Clinton. Many influential Republicans, including Chairman of

the Senate Armed Service Committee John McCain, stressed that there was no need to observe party discipline in social security matters. All in all, calls to rally against the threat (“we are Americans first of all”) turned out to be crucial for the leaders of both parties in the Senate - Republican Mitch McConnell and Democrat Chuck Schumer.

The Presidential Administration, represented by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, reacted negatively to the decision of the Senate. Tillerson [noted](#) that such an initiative deprives American diplomacy of flexibility, which could become an obstacle to achieving success in relations with Russia. After it became clear that the first round had been lost, the White House began to actively prepare for a battle in the House of Representatives. A few days prior to the first official statements, an [article](#) was published in The New York Times which revealed that the White House was undertaking all necessary steps to allow the House of Representatives to soften the bill “which enables Congress to block any future decree by Donald Trump on the lifting of sanctions against Moscow”. A few days later, Kevin Brady, the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, [noted](#) that legal irregularities occurred when the bill was drafted.

Some experts [have hastily announced](#) the victory of the Administration. However, things are not so simple. The crux of the matter is that Congressman Brady can hardly be suspected of sympathizing with Russia or Trump. The fact that his committee has stalled on a sanctions bill was due to a number of other reasons.

### **Battles between executive branches**

Reason number one is internal competition. Political processes in Washington have traditionally been effected against the backdrop of a fiercely competitive struggle not only between the three branches of power but also within each of them. Normative-and-legal acts clearly differentiate between the spheres of activity of the upper and lower houses of the Congress. In this case, all legislative initiatives related to budgetary policy and areas of business, banks, taxes, and energy should be initiated by the House of Representatives and forwarded to the Senate for approval. In the case of this bill, it traveled the opposite route. Many influential Republicans and Democrats (including the House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy) have expressed their discontent with such open procedural violations by the Senate. Obviously, representatives of the lower house could not miss the rare opportunity to “teach their colleagues-Senators a lesson”.

### **Republican factions facing off**

The second reason is the fight between factions within the Republican party. The bill was passed by the Senate quite painlessly since the serious impact of neo-conservatives was evident. Many experts often erroneously equate the Republicans and neocons. Formally, neocons and libertarians represent the Republican party but they are in fact a supra-party structure. For instance, Democrats Chuck Schumer, Eliot Engel, Brad Sherman, Robert Menendez and Benjamin Cardin share the very same views as neoconservatives when it comes to foreign policy whereas Republicans Rand Paul and Mike Lee vehemently criticize foreign policy initiatives advocated by neocons.

Despite Speaker Paul Ryan being a mouthpiece for neo-cons in the House of Representatives, their impact is not so obvious as it is in the Senate. Individual committees are headed by representatives of factions of traditionalists and moderate conservatives. Congressman Brady, for example, is regarded as a representative of the traditionalist faction.

### **Democrats and their contradictions**

The third reason concerns contradictions within the Democratic party. The problem lies in the fact that new sanctions against Russia were adopted as part of the same package of restrictions against Iran. Many influential Democrats see the agreement with Tehran as one of the party’s most important achievements in foreign policy of the last thirty years. Moreover, the “donkeys” see some historical symbolism in it since the US lost ties with Iran during the presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter.

When talks on the inclusion of Russian sanctions in the Iran package started, the Democrats split into two camps. The former was represented by the overwhelming majority of hawks who advocated a single bill covering sanctions against both Iran and Russia. Chuck Schumer managed to persuade his colleagues to support a single bill thanks to his authority and gravitas. The latter group of the Democrats headed by

Minority Leader of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi disagreed with the decision of Schumer and other legislators of the upper house on the need to include restrictions against Moscow and Tehran in a single document. Pelosi has repeatedly stated that the party will not allow the annulment of the agreement with Iran nor the imposition of new sanctions.

Aware of the internal contradictions in both parties, the White House is striving to create new hotbeds of tension. President Trump has returned to the topic of the 2016 Democrat primaries, accusing the leadership of the party of foul play against Bernie Sanders - the main rival of Hillary Clinton. "Hillary Clinton colluded with the Democratic party in order to beat Bernie Sanders. Is she allowed to so collude? Unfair to Bernie!" - Trump wrote on his official Twitter account. No wonder Trump has chosen this topic, as according to the latest [Harris poll](#), Sanders is the country's most popular active politician. Many spin-doctors still believe that Sanders could have defeated Trump easily had he become the Democratic nominee.

Today, Senator Sanders is an ardent critic of Trump policy. He has labeled Trump "a liar" and "the most authoritarian president in American history". In other words, the administration's attempt to create new tensions in the Democratic party did not yield the expected dividends. On the contrary, Trump's efforts have led to opposite results. Paradoxically, the "donkeys", formally a minority, exert more influence on Congress and on public opinion than the "elephants" who are in the majority. So far, Trump and his allies on Capitol Hill have failed to draft and adopt a single important law. In addition to the state of affairs in domestic policy, there have been no fundamental achievements in the foreign policy sphere, either. The administration is still at the epicenter of political scandals which negatively affect both the president and the Republican Party's [approval ratings](#). All in all, the prevailing negative atmosphere surrounding Russia and the domestic political squabbles in the US do little to create prerequisites for lifting sanctions.

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