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Collusion — or a lack of it — turns out to have been the rhetorical trap that ensnared President Trump’s pursuers. There was no need for detailed electoral collusion between the Trump campaign and Vladimir Putin’s oligarchy because they had an overarching deal: the quid of help in the campaign against Hillary Clinton for the quo of a new pro-Russian foreign policy, starting with relief from the Obama administration’s burdensome economic sanctions. The Trumpites knew about the quid and held out the prospect of the quo.

Run down the known facts about the communications between Russians and the Trump campaign and their deal reveals itself. Perhaps, somewhere along the line, Russians also reminded the Trump family of their helpful cooperation with his past financial ventures. Perhaps, also, they articulated their resentment of Mrs. Clinton for her challenge as secretary of state to the legitimacy of Mr. Putin’s own election. But no such speculation is needed to perceive the obvious bargain reached during the campaign of 2016.

Early on, emissaries of the Russian oligarchs sent word of their readiness to help embarrass and undermine the Clinton candidacy. And in June 2016, the Russians lured the Trumpites to a meeting in Trump Tower with a promise of “dirt” against Mrs. Clinton only to use the meeting to harp on their hunger for sanctions relief. As the Trump family openly acknowledged, the Russians spoke at that meeting of a desire to again allow Americans to adopt Russian children. Since the adoptions were halted to retaliate against the American sanctions, it required no dictionary to interpret the oligarchs’ meaning: “dirt” for sanctions relief.

That relief and a warm new relationship with Russia were then freely discussed in public and in private. There was even an effort to concoct a

grand diplomatic bargain by which the Russians would be allowed to legalize their seizure of the Ukrainian Crimea. Michael Cohen and other Trump advisers promoted the idea of letting the Russians “lease” the seized territory for up to 100 years so as to sanitize the reciprocal lifting of the sanctions that Mr. Obama had imposed to punish the land grab.

Sanction relief seems to have been discussed in some of the other secret contacts between Trump operatives and Russians. We know that Michael Flynn lied to the F.B.I. when he denied discussing sanction relief with the Russian ambassador.

As Robert Mueller surely discovered in tracking down these dealings, the promise of policy changes was not in itself illegal. Candidates routinely promise policy changes, often with foreign governments. (Move the embassy in Israel, anyone?)

So why all the secrecy and lying? Candidate Trump made no secret of his intention to forge a warm relationship with the Kremlin. But pledges of sanctions relief and other specific moves while not yet in office were unseemly at best and clearly offensive to the American convention that we have only one president at a time. Mr. Flynn especially had to lie because though already in transition to power he was directly undermining Mr. Obama’s still active and punitive diplomacy against Mr. Putin.

Mr. Flynn, remember, was deemed so helpful to the Mueller investigation that the special counsel pleaded to have him spared any time in jail. He was “colluding” all right, but with legal policy promises, not apparently with election sabotage. And true to the campaign minuet, despite great resistance in Congress, President Trump has watered down the sanctions and otherwise appeased Russian interests, even at the expense of America’s allies. Call it the art of the deal.