Officials say Flynn discussed sanctions

Talks with Russia envoy said to have occurred before Trump took office

BY GREG MILLER, ADAM ENTOUS AND ELLEN NAKASHIMA

National security adviser Michael Flynn privately discussed U.S. sanctions against Russia with that country's ambassador to the United States during the month before President Trump took office, contrary to public assertions by Trump officials, current and former U.S. officials said.

Flynn's communications with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak were interpreted by some senior U.S. officials as an inappropriate and potentially illegal signal to the Kremlin that it could expect a reprieve from sanctions that were being imposed by the Obama administration in late December to punish Russia for its alleged interference in the 2016 election.

Flynn on Wednesday denied that he had discussed sanctions with Kislyak. Asked in an interview whether he had ever done so, he twice said, “No.”

On Thursday, Flynn, through his spokesman, backed away from the denial. The spokesman said Flynn “indicated that while he had no recollection of discussing sanctions, he couldn’t be certain that the topic never came up.”

Officials said this week that the FBI is continuing to examine Flynn’s communications with Kislyak. Several officials emphasized that while sanctions were discussed, they did not see evidence that Flynn had an intent to convey an explicit promise to take action after the inauguration.

Flynn’s contacts with the ambassador attracted attention within the Obama administration because of the timing. U.S. intelligence agencies were then concluding that Russia had waged a cyber campaign designed in part to help elect Trump; his senior adviser on national security matters was discussing the potential consequences for Moscow, officials said.

The talks were part of a series of contacts between Flynn and Kislyak that began before the Nov. 8 election and continued during the transition, officials said. In a recent interview, Kislyak confirmed that he had communicated with Flynn by text message, by phone and in person, but declined to say whether they had discussed sanctions.

The emerging details contradict pub-
lic statements by incoming senior administration officials including Mike Pence, then the vice president-elect. They acknowledged only a handful of text messages and calls exchanged between Flynn and Kislyak late last year and denied that either ever raised the subject of sanctions.

“They did not discuss anything having to do with the United States’ decision to expel diplomats or impose censure against Russia,” Pence said in an interview with CBS News last month, noting that he had spoken with Flynn about the matter. Pence also made a more sweeping assertion, saying there had been no contact between members of Trump’s team and Russia during the campaign. To suggest otherwise, he said, “is to give credence to some of these bizarre rumors that have swirled around the candidacy.”

Neither of those assertions is consistent with the fuller account of Flynn’s contacts with Kislyak provided by officials who had access to reports from U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies that routinely monitor the communications of Russian diplomats. Nine current and former officials, who were in senior positions at multiple agencies at the time of the calls, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters.

All of those officials said Flynn’s ref-
erences to the election-related sanctions were explicit. Two of those officials went further, saying that Flynn urged Russia not to overreact to the penalties being imposed by President Barack Obama, making clear that the two sides would be in position to review the matter after Trump was sworn in as president.

“Kislyak was left with the impression that the sanctions would be revisited at a later time,” said a former official.

A third official put it more bluntly, saying that either Flynn had misled Pence or that Pence misspoke. An administration official stressed that Pence made his comments based on his conversation with Flynn. The sanctions in question have so far remained in place.

The nature of Flynn’s pre-inauguration message to Kislyak triggered debate among officials in the Obama administration and intelligence agencies over whether Flynn had violated a law against unauthorized citizens interfering in U.S. disputes with foreign governments, according to officials familiar with that debate. Those officials were already alarmed by what they saw as a Russian assault on the U.S. election.

U.S. officials said that seeking to build such a case against Flynn would be daunting. The law against U.S. citizens interfering in foreign diplomacy, known as the Logan Act, stems from a 1799 statute that has never been prosecuted. As a result, there is no case history to help guide authorities on when to proceed or how to secure a conviction.

Officials also cited political sensitivities. Prominent Americans in and out of government are so frequently in communication with foreign officials that singling out one individual — particularly one poised for a top White House job — would invite charges of political persecution.

Former U.S. officials also said aggressive enforcement would probably discourage appropriate contact. Michael McFaul, who served as U.S. ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration, said that he was in Moscow meeting with officials in the weeks leading up to Obama’s 2008 election win.

“As a former diplomat and U.S. government official, one needs to be able to have contact with foreigners to do one’s job,” McFaul said. McFaul, a Russia scholar, said he was careful never to signal pending policy changes before Obama took office.

On Wednesday, Flynn said that he first met Kislyak in 2013 when Flynn was director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and made a trip to Moscow. Kislyak helped coordinate that trip, Flynn said.

Flynn said that he spoke to Kislyak on a range of subjects in late December, including arranging a call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump after the inauguration and expressing his condolences after Russia’s ambassador to Turkey was assassinated. “I called to say I couldn’t believe the murder of their ambassador,” Flynn said. Asked whether there was any mention of sanctions in his communica-
tions with Kislyak, Flynn said, “No.”

Kislyak characterized his conversations with Flynn as benign during a brief interview at a conference this month. “It’s something all diplomats do,” he said.

Kislyak said that he had been in contact with Flynn since before the election, but declined to answer questions about the subjects they discussed. Kislyak is known for his assiduous cultivation of high-level officials in Washington and was seated in the front row of then-GOP candidate Trump’s first major foreign policy speech in April of last year. The ambassador would not discuss the origin of his relationship with Flynn.

In his CBS interview, Pence said that Flynn had “been in touch with diplomatic leaders, security leaders in some 30 countries. That’s exactly what the incoming national security adviser should do.”

Official concern about Flynn’s interactions with Kislyak was heightened when Putin declared on Dec. 30 that Moscow would not retaliate after the Obama administration announced a day earlier the expulsion of 35 suspected Russian spies and the forced closure of Russian-owned compounds in Maryland and New York.

Instead, Putin said he would focus on “the restoration of Russia-United States relations” after Obama left office, and put off considering any retaliatory measures until Moscow had a chance to evaluate Trump’s policies.

Trump responded with effusive praise for Putin. “Great move on the delay,” he said in a posting to his Twitter account. “I always knew he was very smart.”

Putin’s reaction cut against a long practice of reciprocation on diplomatic expulsions, and came after his foreign minister had vowed that there would be reprisals against the United States.

Putin’s muted response — which took White House officials by surprise — raised some officials’ suspicions that Moscow may have been promised a reprieve, and triggered a search by U.S. spy agencies for clues.

“Something happened in those 24 hours” between Obama’s announcement and Putin’s response, a former senior U.S. official said. Officials began poring over intelligence reports, intercepted communications and diplomatic cables, and saw evidence that Flynn and Kislyak had communicated by text and telephone around the time of the announcement.

Trump transition officials acknowledged those contacts weeks later after they were reported in The Washington Post but denied that sanctions were discussed. Trump press secretary Sean Spicer said Jan. 13 that Flynn had “reached out to” the Russian ambassador on Christmas Day to extend holiday greetings. On Dec. 28, as word of the Obama sanctions spread, Kislyak sent a message to Flynn requesting a call. “Flynn took that call,” Spicer said, adding that it “centered on the logistics of setting up a call with the president of Russia and [Trump] after the election.”

Other officials were categorical. “I can
tell you that during his call, sanctions were not discussed whatsoever,” a senior transition official told The Post at the time. When Pence faced questions on television that weekend, he said “those conversations that happened to occur around the time that the United States took action to expel diplomats had nothing whatsoever to do with those sanctions.”

Current and former U.S. officials said that assertion was not true.

Like Trump, Flynn has shown an affinity for Russia that is at odds with the views of most of his military and intelligence peers. Flynn raised eyebrows in 2015 when he appeared in photographs seated next to Putin at a lavish party in Moscow for the Kremlin-controlled RT television network.

In an earlier interview with The Post, Flynn acknowledged that he had been paid through his speakers bureau to give a speech at the event and defended his attendance by saying he saw no distinction between RT and U.S. news channels, including CNN.

A retired U.S. Army lieutenant general, Flynn served multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks — tours in which he held a series of high-level intelligence assignments working with U.S. Special Operations forces hunting al-Qaeda operatives and Islamist militants.

Former colleagues said that narrow focus led Flynn to see the threat posed by Islamist groups as overwhelming other security concerns, including Russia’s renewed aggression. Instead, Flynn came to see America’s long-standing adversary as a potential ally against terrorist groups, and himself as being in a unique position to forge closer ties after traveling to Moscow in 2013 while serving as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Flynn has frequently boasted that he was the first DIA director to be invited into the headquarters of Russia’s military intelligence directorate, known as the GRU, although at least one of his predecessors was granted similar access. “Flynn thought he developed some rapport with the GRU chief,” a former senior U.S. military official said.

U.S. intelligence agencies say they have tied the GRU to Russia’s theft of troves of email messages from Democratic Party computer networks and accuse Moscow of then delivering those materials to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks, which published them in phases during the campaign to hurt Hillary Clinton, Trump’s Democratic rival.

Flynn was pushed out of the DIA job in 2014 amid concerns about his management of the sprawling agency. He became a fierce critic of the Obama administration before joining the Trump campaign last year.

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Officials say Flynn discussed sanctions

Tolls with Russia except those he wanted before Trump took office

Flynn was pushed out of the White House within days of Trump's inauguration. Now, in the Oval Office, the president is seen as being in the middle of a growing crisis, fanning the flames as he and his top aides assert that the longtime U.S. ally was one of Trump's primary foreign policy considerations.

In Idaho, replacing ACA may not be as easy as rejecting it

Repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act may be Trump's top priority, but in Idaho, it is a different story. Idaho's decision to opt out of the law and its expansion creates a complex problem for the state's leaders.

Conway 'counseled' after touting Ivanka's brand

Former White House press secretary Sarah Sanders has become the latest member of the Trump administration to become embroiled in a controversy over conflicts of interest.

Suspension of entry ban upheld

The Supreme Court has upheld the Trump administration's travel ban, which bars entry to the United States by people from several Muslim-majority countries.

Go buy Ivanka's stuff: Conway fuels concerns about Trump ethical conflicts

The Conway episode followed a series of incidents in which Trump's closest aides have been accused of violating ethical standards.

Officially, a Russia-U.S. business deal in 2007

The deal between Donald Trump's business and a Russian oligarch was not reported by any major publication until earlier this year.

The Conway episode followed a series of incidents in which Trump's closest aides have been accused of violating ethical standards.

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Sessions spoke twice to Russian envoy

Revelation contradicts his testimony at confirmation hearing

BY ADAM ENTOUS, ELLEN NAKASHIMA AND GREG MILLER

Then-Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) spoke twice last year with Russia’s ambassador to the United States, Justice Department officials said, encounters he did not disclose when asked about possible contacts between members of President Trump’s campaign and representatives of Moscow during Sessions’s confirmation hearing to become attorney general.

One of the meetings was a private conversation between Sessions and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak that took place in September in the senator’s office, at the height of what U.S. intelligence officials say was a Russian cyber campaign to upend the U.S. presidential race.

The previously undisclosed discussions could fuel new congressional calls for the appointment of a special counsel to investigate Russia’s alleged role in the 2016 presidential election. As attorney general, Sessions oversees the Justice Department and the FBI, which have been leading investigations into Russian meddling and any links to Trump’s associates. He has so far resisted calls to recuse himself.

When Sessions spoke with Kislyak in July and September, the senator was a senior member of the influential Armed Services Committee as well as one of Trump’s top foreign policy advisers. Sessions played a prominent role supporting Trump on the stump after formally joining the campaign in February 2016.

At his Jan. 10 Judiciary Committee confirmation hearing, Sessions was asked by Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) what he would do if he learned of any evidence that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government in the course of the 2016 campaign.

“I’m not aware of any of those activities,” he responded. He added: “I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians.”

Officials said Sessions did not consider the conversations relevant to the lawmakers’ questions and did not remember in detail what he discussed with Kislyak.

“There was absolutely nothing misleading about his answer,” said Sarah Isgur
Meetings could fuel new calls for special counsel

Flores, Sessions’s spokeswoman.

In January, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) asked Sessions for answers to written questions. “Several of the President-elect’s nominees or senior advisers have Russian ties. Have you been in contact with anyone connected to any part of the Russian government about the 2016 election, either before or after election day?” Leahy wrote.

Sessions responded with one word: “No.”

In a statement issued Wednesday night, Sessions said he “never met with any Russian officials to discuss issues of the campaign. I have no idea what this allegation is about. It is false.”

Justice officials said Sessions met with Kislyak on Sept. 8 in his capacity as a member of the armed services panel rather than in his role as a Trump campaign surrogate.

“He was asked during the hearing about communications between Russia and the Trump campaign — not about
meetings he took as a senator and a member of the Armed Services Committee,” Flores said.

She added that Sessions last year had more than 25 conversations with foreign ambassadors as a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, including the British, Korean, Japanese, Polish, Indian, Chinese, Canadian, Australian and German ambassadors, in addition to Kislyak.

In the case of the September meeting, one department official who came to the defense of the attorney general said, “There’s just not strong recollection of what was said.”

The Russian ambassador did not respond to requests for comment about his contacts with Sessions.

The Washington Post contacted all 26 members of the 2016 Senate Armed Services Committee to see whether any lawmakers besides Sessions met with Kislyak in 2016. Of the 20 lawmakers who responded, every senator, including Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.), said they did not meet with the Russian ambassador last year. The other lawmakers on the panel did not respond as of Wednesday evening.

“Members of the committee have not been beating a path to Kislyak’s door,” a senior Senate Armed Services Committee staffer said, citing tensions in relations with Moscow. Besides Sessions, the staffer added, “There haven’t been a ton of members who are looking to meet with Kislyak for their committee duties.”

Last month, The Post reported that Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn had discussed U.S. sanctions with Kislyak during the month before Trump took office, contrary to public assertions by Mike Pence, the vice president-elect, and other top Trump officials. Flynn was forced to resign the following week.

When asked to comment on Sessions’s contacts with Kislyak, Franken said in a statement to The Post on Wednesday: “If it’s true that Attorney General Sessions met with the Russian ambassador in the midst of the campaign, then I am very troubled that his response to my questioning during his confirmation hearing was, at best, misleading.”

Franken added: “It is now clearer than ever that the attorney general cannot, in good faith, oversee an investigation at the Department of Justice and the FBI of the Trump-Russia connection, and he must recuse himself immediately.”

Several Democratic members of the House on Wednesday night called on Sessions to resign from his post.

“After lying under oath to Congress about his own communications with the Russians, the Attorney General must resign,” House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said in a statement, adding that “Sessions is not fit to serve as the top law enforcement officer of our country.”

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), a senior member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said on Twitter late Wednesday that “we need a special counsel to investigate Trump associates’ ties to Russia.”
Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said at a CNN town hall Wednesday night that if the substance of Sessions’s conversations with the Russian ambassador proved to be improper or suspect, he too would join the call for Sessions to recuse himself from the investigation.

“If there is something there and it goes up the chain of investigation, it is clear to me that Jeff Sessions, who is my dear friend, cannot make that decision about Trump,” Graham said — although he stressed that Sessions’s contacts with the Russian ambassador could have been “innocent.”

“But if there’s something there that the FBI thinks is criminal in nature, then for sure you need a special prosecutor. If that day ever comes, I’ll be the first one to say it needs to be somebody other than Jeff.”

Current and former U.S. officials say they see Kislyak as a diplomat, not an intelligence operative. But they were not sure to what extent, if any, Kislyak was aware of or involved in the covert Russian election campaign.

Steven Hall, former head of Russia operations at the CIA, said that Russia would have been keenly interested in cultivating a relationship with Sessions because of his role on key congressional committees and as an early adviser to Trump.

Sessions’s membership on the Armed Services Committee would have made him a priority for the Russian ambassador. “The fact that he had already placed himself at least ideologically behind Trump would have been an added bonus for Kislyak,” Hall said.

Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who until 2014 served as U.S. ambassador to Russia, said he was not surprised that Kislyak would seek a meeting with Sessions. “The weird part is to conceal it,” he said. “That was at the height of all the discussions of what Russia was doing during the election.”

Two months before the September meeting, Sessions attended a Heritage Foundation event in July on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention that was attended by about 50 ambassadors. When the event was over, a small group of ambassadors approached Sessions as he was leaving the podium, and Kislyak was among them, the Justice Department official said.

Sessions then spoke individually to some of the ambassadors, including Kislyak, the official said. In the informal exchanges, the ambassadors expressed appreciation for his remarks and some of them invited him to events they were sponsoring, said the official, citing a former Sessions staffer who was at the event.

Democratic lawmakers, including senior members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, have demanded in recent weeks that Sessions recuse himself from the government’s inquiry into possible ties between Trump associates and Russia.

Last week, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), a senior member of the House Judiciary Committee, became one of the few Repub-
lican representatives to state publicly the need for an independent investigation.

Sessions’s public position on Russia has evolved over time.

In an interview with RealClear World on the sidelines of the German Marshall Fund’s Brussels Forum in March 2015, Sessions said the United States and Europe “have to unify” against Russia.

More than a year later, he spoke about fostering a stronger relationship with the Kremlin. In a July 2016 interview with CNN’s “State of the Union,” Sessions praised Trump’s plan to build better relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“Donald Trump is right. We need to figure out a way to end this cycle of hostility that’s putting this country at risk, costing us billions of dollars in defense, and creating hostilities,” Sessions told CNN.

Asked whether he viewed Putin as a good or bad leader, Sessions told CNN: “We have a lot of bad leaders around the world that operate in ways we would never tolerate in the United States. But the question is, can we have a more peaceful, effective relationship with Russia? Utilizing interests that are similar in a realistic way to make this world a safer place and get off this dangerous hostility with Russia? I think it’s possible.”

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Sessions spoke twice to Russian envoy

White House could slash EPA staff 20% 

3 words in Trump’s speech expose a White House divide

Chaotic Yemen raid still reverberates for president

Meetings could fuel new calls for special counsel

Raid in Yemen, SEAL’s death still reverberate for Trump
Early last August, an envelope with extraordinary handling restrictions arrived at the White House. Sent by courier from the CIA, it carried “eyes only” instructions that its contents be shown to just four people: President Barack Obama and three senior aides.
Inside was an intelligence bombshell, a report drawn from sourcing deep inside the Russian government that detailed Russian President Vladimir Putin’s direct involvement in a cyber campaign to disrupt and discredit the U.S. presidential race.

But it went further. The intelligence captured Putin’s specific instructions on the operation’s audacious objectives — defeat or at least damage the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and help elect her opponent, Donald Trump.

At that point, the outlines of the Russian assault on the U.S. election were increasingly apparent. Hackers with ties to Russian intelligence services had been rummaging through Democratic Party computer networks, as well as some Republican systems, for more than a year. In July, the FBI had opened an investigation of contacts between Russian officials and Trump associates. And on July 22, nearly 20,000 emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee were dumped online by WikiLeaks.
But at the highest levels of government, among those responsible for managing the crisis, the first moment of true foreboding about Russia’s intentions arrived with that CIA intelligence.

The material was so sensitive that CIA Director John Brennan kept it out of the President’s Daily Brief, concerned that even that restricted report’s distribution was too broad. The CIA package came with instructions that it be returned immediately after it was read. To guard against leaks, subsequent meetings in the Situation Room followed the same protocols as planning sessions for the Osama bin Laden raid.

It took time for other parts of the intelligence community to endorse the CIA’s view. Only in the administration’s final weeks in office did it tell the public, in a declassified report, what officials had learned from Brennan in August — that Putin was working to elect Trump.

Over that five-month interval, the Obama administration secretly debated dozens of options for deterring or punishing Russia, including cyberattacks on Russian infrastructure, the release of CIA-gathered material that might embarrass Putin and sanctions that officials said could “crater” the Russian economy.
But in the end, in late December, Obama approved a modest package combining measures that had been drawn up to punish Russia for other issues — expulsions of 35 diplomats and the closure of two Russian compounds — with economic sanctions so narrowly targeted that even those who helped design them describe their impact as largely symbolic.

Obama also approved a previously undisclosed covert measure that authorized planting cyber weapons in Russia’s infrastructure, the digital equivalent of bombs that could be detonated if the United States found itself in an escalating exchange with Moscow. The project, which Obama approved in a covert-action finding, was still in its planning stages when Obama left office. It would be up to President Trump to decide whether to use the capability.

In political terms, Russia’s interference was the crime of the century, an unprecedented and largely successful destabilizing attack on American democracy. It was a case that took almost no time to solve, traced to the Kremlin through cyber-forensics and intelligence on Putin’s involvement. And yet, because of the divergent ways Obama and Trump have handled the matter, Moscow appears unlikely to face proportionate consequences.

Those closest to Obama defend the administration’s response to Russia’s meddling. They note that by August it was too late to prevent the transfer to WikiLeaks and other groups of the troves of emails that would spill out in the ensuing months. They believe that a series of warnings — including one that Obama delivered to Putin in September — prompted Moscow to abandon any plans of further aggression, such as sabotage of U.S. voting systems.

Denis McDonough, who served as Obama’s chief of staff, said that the administration regarded Russia’s interference as an attack on the “heart of our system.”
“We set out from a first-order principle that required us to defend the integrity of the vote,” McDonough said in an interview. “Importantly, we did that. It’s also important to establish what happened and what they attempted to do so as to ensure that we take the steps necessary to stop it from happening again.”

But other administration officials look back on the Russia period with remorse.

“It is the hardest thing about my entire time in government to defend,” said a former senior Obama administration official involved in White House deliberations on Russia. “I feel like we sort of choked.”

The post-election period has been dominated by the overlapping investigations into whether Trump associates colluded with Russia before the election and whether the president sought to obstruct the FBI probe afterward. That spectacle has obscured the magnitude of Moscow’s attempt to hijack a precious and now vulnerable-seeming American democratic process.

Beset by allegations of hidden ties between his campaign and Russia, Trump has shown no inclination to revisit the matter and has denied any collusion or obstruction on his part. As a result, the expulsions and modest sanctions announced by Obama on Dec. 29 continue to stand as the United States’ most forceful response.

“The punishment did not fit the crime,” said Michael McFaul, who served as U.S. ambassador to Russia for the Obama administration from 2012 to 2014. “Russia violated our sovereignty, meddling in one of our most sacred acts as a democracy — electing our president. The Kremlin should have paid a much higher price for that attack. And U.S. policymakers now — both in the White House and
Congress — should consider new actions to deter future Russian interventions.”

The Senate this month passed a bill that would impose additional election- and Ukraine-related sanctions on Moscow and limit Trump’s ability to lift them. The measure requires House approval, however, and Trump’s signature.

This account of the Obama administration’s response to Russia’s interference is based on interviews with more than three dozen current and former U.S. officials in senior positions in government, including at the White House, the State, Defense and Homeland Security departments, and U.S. intelligence services. Most agreed to speak only on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the issue.

The White House, the CIA, the FBI, the National Security Agency and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment.

‘Deeply concerned’

The CIA breakthrough came at a stage of the presidential campaign when Trump had secured the GOP nomination but was still regarded as a distant long shot. Clinton held comfortable leads in major polls, and Obama expected that he would be transferring power to someone who had served in his Cabinet.

The intelligence on Putin was extraordinary on multiple levels, including as a feat of espionage.

For spy agencies, gaining insights into the intentions of foreign
leaders is among the highest priorities. But Putin is a remarkably elusive target. A former KGB officer, he takes extreme precautions to guard against surveillance, rarely communicating by phone or computer, always running sensitive state business from deep within the confines of the Kremlin.

The Washington Post is withholding some details of the intelligence at the request of the U.S. government.

In early August, Brennan alerted senior White House officials to the Putin intelligence, making a call to deputy national security adviser Avril Haines and pulling national security adviser Susan E. Rice aside after a meeting before briefing Obama along with Rice, Haines and McDonough in the Oval Office.

Officials described the president’s reaction as grave. Obama “was deeply concerned and wanted as much information as fast as possible,” a former official said. “He wanted the entire intelligence community all over this.”

Concerns about Russian interference had gathered throughout the summer.

Russia experts had begun to see a troubling pattern of propaganda in which fictitious news stories, assumed to be generated by Moscow, proliferated across social-media platforms.

Officials at the State Department and FBI became alarmed by an unusual spike in requests from Russia for temporary visas for offi-
ials with technical skills seeking permission to enter the United States for short-term assignments at Russian facilities. At the FBI’s behest, the State Department delayed approving the visas until after the election.

Meanwhile, the FBI was tracking a flurry of hacking activity against U.S. political parties, think tanks and other targets. Russia had gained entry to DNC systems in the summer of 2015 and spring of 2016, but the breaches did not become public until they were disclosed in a June 2016 report by The Post.

Even after the late-July WikiLeaks dump, which came on the eve of the Democratic convention and led to the resignation of Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) as the DNC’s chairwoman, U.S. intelligence officials continued to express uncertainty about who was behind the hacks or why they were carried out.

At a public security conference in Aspen, Colo., in late July, Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. noted that Russia had a long history of meddling in American elections but that U.S. spy agencies were not ready to “make the call on attribution” for what was happening in 2016.

“We don’t know enough … to ascribe motivation,” Clapper said. “Was this just to stir up trouble or was this ultimately to try to influence an election?”

Brennan convened a secret task force at CIA headquarters composed of several dozen analysts and officers from the CIA, the NSA and the FBI.

The unit functioned as a sealed compartment, its work hidden from the rest of the intelligence community. Those brought in signed new non-disclosure agreements to be granted access to intelligence from all three participating agencies.
They worked exclusively for two groups of “customers,” officials said. The first was Obama and fewer than 14 senior officials in government. The second was a team of operations specialists at the CIA, NSA and FBI who took direction from the task force on where to aim their subsequent efforts to collect more intelligence on Russia.

Don’t make things worse

The secrecy extended into the White House.

Rice, Haines and White House homeland-security adviser Lisa Monaco convened meetings in the Situation Room to weigh the mounting evidence of Russian interference and generate options
for how to respond. At first, only four senior security officials were allowed to attend: Brennan, Clapper, Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch and FBI Director James B. Comey. Aides ordinarily allowed entry as “plus-ones” were barred.

Gradually, the circle widened to include Vice President Biden and others. Agendas sent to Cabinet secretaries — including John F. Kerry at the State Department and Ashton B. Carter at the Pentagon — arrived in envelopes that subordinates were not supposed to open. Sometimes the agendas were withheld until participants had taken their seats in the Situation Room.

Throughout his presidency, Obama’s approach to national security challenges was deliberate and cautious. He came into office seeking to end wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was loath to act without support from allies overseas and firm political footing at home. He was drawn only reluctantly into foreign crises, such as the civil war in Syria, that presented no clear exit for the United States.

Obama’s approach often seemed reducible to a single imperative: Don’t make things worse. As brazen as the Russian attacks on the election seemed, Obama and his top advisers feared that things could get far worse.

They were concerned that any pre-election response could provoke an escalation from Putin. Moscow’s meddling to that point was seen as deeply concerning but unlikely to materially affect the outcome of the election. Far more worrisome to the Obama team was the prospect of a cyber-assault on voting systems before and on Election Day.

They also worried that any action they took would be perceived as political interference in an already volatile campaign. By August, Trump was predicting that the election would be rigged. Obama
officials feared providing fuel to such claims, playing into Russia’s efforts to discredit the outcome and potentially contaminating the expected Clinton triumph.

Before departing for an August vacation to Martha’s Vineyard, Obama instructed aides to pursue ways to deter Moscow and proceed along three main paths: Get a high-confidence assessment from U.S. intelligence agencies on Russia’s role and intent; shore up any vulnerabilities in state-run election systems; and seek bipartisan support from congressional leaders for a statement condemning Moscow and urging states to accept federal help.

The administration encountered obstacles at every turn.
Despite the intelligence the CIA had produced, other agencies were slower to endorse a conclusion that Putin was personally directing the operation and wanted to help Trump. “It was definitely compelling, but it was not definitive,” said one senior administration official. “We needed more.”

Some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia came from another country, officials said. Because of the source of the material, the NSA was reluctant to view it with high confidence.

Brennan moved swiftly to schedule private briefings with congressional leaders. But getting appointments with certain Republicans proved difficult, officials said, and it was not until after Labor Day that Brennan had reached all members of the “Gang of Eight” — the majority and minority leaders of both houses and the chairmen and ranking Democrats on the Senate and House intelligence committees.

Jeh Johnson, the homeland-security secretary, was responsible for finding out whether the government could quickly shore up the security of the nation’s archaic patchwork of voting systems. He floated the idea of designating state mechanisms “critical infrastructure,” a label that would have entitled states to receive priority in federal cybersecurity assistance, putting them on a par with U.S. defense contractors and financial networks.

On Aug. 15, Johnson arranged a conference call with dozens of state officials, hoping to enlist their support. He ran into a wall of resistance.

The reaction “ranged from neutral to negative,” Johnson said in congressional testimony Wednesday.
Brian Kemp, the Republican secretary of state of Georgia, used the call to denounce Johnson’s proposal as an assault on state rights. “I think it was a politically calculated move by the previous administration,” Kemp said in a recent interview, adding that he remains unconvinced that Russia waged a campaign to disrupt the 2016 race. “I don’t necessarily believe that,” he said.

Stung by the reaction, the White House turned to Congress for help, hoping that a bipartisan appeal to states would be more effective.

In early September, Johnson, Comey and Monaco arrived on Capitol Hill in a caravan of black SUVs for a meeting with 12 key members of Congress, including the leadership of both parties.

The meeting devolved into a partisan squabble.

“The Dems were, ‘Hey, we have to tell the public,’” recalled one participant. But Republicans resisted, arguing that to warn the public that the election was under attack would further Russia’s aim of sapping confidence in the system.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) went further, officials said, voicing skepticism that the underlying intelligence truly supported the White House’s claims. Through a spokeswoman, McConnell declined to comment, citing the secrecy of that meeting.

Key Democrats were stunned by the GOP response and exasperated that the White House seemed willing to let Republican opposition block any pre-election move.

On Sept. 22, two California Democrats — Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Adam B. Schiff — did what they couldn’t get the White House to do. They issued a statement making clear that they had
learned from intelligence briefings that Russia was directing a campaign to undermine the election, but they stopped short of saying to what end.

A week later, McConnell and other congressional leaders issued a cautious statement that encouraged state election officials to ensure their networks were “secure from attack.” The release made no mention of Russia and emphasized that the lawmakers “would oppose any effort by the federal government” to encroach on the states’ authorities.

When U.S. spy agencies reached unanimous agreement in late September that the interference was a Russian operation directed by Putin, Obama directed spy chiefs to prepare a public statement summarizing the intelligence in broad strokes.

With Obama still determined to avoid any appearance of politics, the statement would not carry his signature.

On Oct. 7, the administration offered its first public comment on Russia’s “active measures,” in a three-paragraph statement issued by Johnson and Clapper. Comey had initially agreed to attach his name, as well, officials said, but changed his mind at the last minute, saying that it was too close to the election for the bureau to be involved.

“The U.S. intelligence community is confident that the Russian government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations,” the statement said. “We believe, based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts, that only Russia’s senior-most officials could have authorized these activities.”

Early drafts accused Putin by name, but the reference was removed out of concern that it might endanger intelligence sources and
methods.

The statement was issued around 3:30 p.m., timed for maximum media coverage. Instead, it was quickly drowned out. At 4 p.m., The Post published a story about crude comments Trump had made about women that were captured on an “Access Hollywood” tape. Half an hour later, WikiLeaks published its first batch of emails stolen from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta.

To some, Obama’s determination to avoid politicizing the Russia issue had the opposite effect: It meant that he allowed politics to shape his administration’s response to what some believed should have been treated purely as a national security threat.

Schiff said that the administration’s justifications for inaction often left him with a sense of “cognitive dissonance.”

“The administration doesn’t need congressional support to issue a statement of attribution or impose sanctions,” Schiff said in a recent interview. He said many groups inadvertently abetted Russia’s campaign, including Republicans who refused to confront Moscow and media organizations that eagerly mined the troves of hacked emails.

“Where Democrats need to take responsibility,” Schiff said, “is that we failed to persuade the country why they should care that a foreign power is meddling in our affairs.”

‘Ample time’ after election

The Situation Room is actually a complex of secure spaces in the basement level of the West Wing. A video feed from the main room courses through some National Security Council offices, allowing senior aides sitting at their desks to see — but not hear — when
meetings are underway.

As the Russia-related sessions with Cabinet members began in August, the video feed was shut off. The last time that had happened on a sustained basis, officials said, was in the spring of 2011 during the run-up to the U.S. Special Operations raid on bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan.

The blacked-out screens were seen as an ominous sign among lower-level White House officials who were largely kept in the dark about the Russia deliberations even as they were tasked with generating options for retaliation against Moscow.

Much of that work was led by the Cyber Response Group, an NSC unit with representatives from the CIA, NSA, State Department and Pentagon.

The early options they discussed were ambitious. They looked at sectorwide economic sanctions and cyberattacks that would take Russian networks temporarily offline. One official informally suggested — though never formally proposed — moving a U.S. naval carrier group into the Baltic Sea as a symbol of resolve.

What those lower-level officials did not know was that the principals and their deputies had by late September all but ruled out any pre-election retaliation against Moscow. They feared that any action would be seen as political and that Putin, motivated by a seething resentment of Clinton, was prepared to go beyond fake news and email dumps.

The FBI had detected suspected Russian attempts to penetrate election systems in 21 states, and at least one senior White House official assumed that Moscow would try all 50, officials said. Some officials believed the attempts were meant to be detected to unnerve
the Americans. The patchwork nature of the United States’ 3,000 or so voting jurisdictions would make it hard for Russia to swing the outcome, but Moscow could still sow chaos.

“We turned to other scenarios” the Russians might attempt, said Michael Daniel, who was cybersecurity coordinator at the White House, “such as disrupting the voter rolls, deleting every 10th voter [from registries] or flipping two digits in everybody’s address.” The White House also worried that they had not yet seen the worst of Russia’s campaign. WikiLeaks and DCLeaks, a website set up in June 2016 by hackers believed to be Russian operatives, already had troves of emails. But U.S. officials feared that Russia had more explosive material or was willing to fabricate it.
“Our primary interest in August, September and October was to prevent them from doing the max they could do,” said a senior administration official. “We made the judgment that we had ample time after the election, regardless of outcome, for punitive measures.”

The assumption that Clinton would win contributed to the lack of urgency.

Instead, the administration issued a series of warnings.

Brennan delivered the first on Aug. 4 in a blunt phone call with Alexander Bortnikov, the director of the FSB, Russia's powerful security service.

A month later, Obama confronted Putin directly during a meeting of world leaders in Hangzhou, China. Accompanied only by interpreters, Obama told Putin that “we knew what he was doing and [he] better stop or else,” according to a senior aide who subsequently spoke with Obama. Putin responded by demanding proof and accusing the United States of interfering in Russia’s internal affairs.

In a subsequent news conference, Obama alluded to the exchange and issued a veiled threat. “We’re moving into a new era here where a number of countries have significant capacities,” he said. “Frankly, we’ve got more capacity than anybody both offensively and defensively.”

There were at least two other warnings.

On Oct. 7, the day that the Clapper-Johnson statement was released, Rice summoned Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak to
the White House and handed him a message to relay to Putin.

Then, on Oct. 31, the administration delivered a final pre-election message via a secure channel to Moscow originally created to avert a nuclear exchange. The message noted that the United States had detected malicious activity, originating from servers in Russia, targeting U.S. election systems and warned that meddling would be regarded as unacceptable interference. Russia confirmed the next day that it had received the message but replied only after the election through the same channel, denying the accusation.

As Election Day approached, proponents of taking action against Russia made final, futile appeals to Obama’s top aides: McDonough, Rice and Haines. Because their offices were part of a suite of spaces in the West Wing, securing their support on any national security issue came to be known as “moving the suite.”

One of the last to try before the election was Kerry. Often perceived as reluctant to confront Russia, in part to preserve his attempts to negotiate a Syria peace deal, Kerry was at critical moments one of the leading hawks.

In October, Kerry’s top aides had produced an “action memo” that included a package of retaliatory measures including economic sanctions. Knowing the White House was not willing to act before the election, the plan called for the measures to be announced almost immediately after votes had been securely cast and counted.

Kerry signed the memo and urged the White House to convene a principals meeting to discuss the plan, officials said. “The response was basically, ‘Not now;’” one official said.

Election Day arrived without penalty for Moscow.
Despite the dire warnings, there were no meltdowns in the United States’ voting infrastructure on Nov. 8, no evidence of hacking-related fraud, crashing of electronic ballots or manipulation of vote counts.

The outcome itself, however, was a shock.

Suddenly, Obama faced a successor who had praised WikiLeaks and prodded Moscow to steal even more Clinton emails, while dismissing the idea that Russia was any more responsible for the election assault than “somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds.”
“The White House was mortified and shocked,” said a former administration official. “From national security people there was a sense of immediate introspection, of, ‘Wow, did we mishandle this.’”

At first, there was no outward sign of new resolve.

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After his failed pre-election bid, Kerry returned with a fallback proposal, calling for the creation of a bipartisan commission to investigate Russian interference and make recommendations on how to protect future elections.

The panel would be modeled on the commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, producing a definitive report and making recommendations that led to the overhaul of U.S. intelligence agencies.

“The idea was that if you think doing something aggressive is too inflammatory, then we shouldn’t have a problem getting to the truth about what happened,” said an administration official familiar with the Kerry plan. Trump was expected to oppose such a plan, but setting it in motion before he was sworn in would make it “harder and uglier politically” for him to block.

Supporters’ confidence was buoyed when McDonough signaled that he planned to “tabledrop” the proposal at the next NSC meeting, one that would be chaired by Obama. Kerry was overseas and par-
ticipated by videoconference.

To some, the “tabledrop” term has a tactical connotation beyond the obvious. It is sometimes used as a means of securing approval of an idea by introducing it before opponents have a chance to form counterarguments.

“We thought this was a good sign,” a former State Department official said.

But as soon as McDonough introduced the proposal for a commission, he began criticizing it, arguing that it would be perceived as partisan and almost certainly blocked by Congress.

Obama then echoed McDonough’s critique, effectively killing any chance that a Russia commission would be formed.

McDonough declined to comment on the principals’ committee meeting on the commission or any other sensitive matters but acknowledged that he opposed the idea, in part because he believed it would be premature to do so before U.S. intelligence agencies and Congress had conducted their investigations.

‘Demoralized’

Several officials described the post-election atmosphere at the White House as somber. “It was like a funeral parlor,” according to one official who said that work on Russia and other subjects slowed as officials began to anticipate the damage to Obama’s policies and legacy.

Others disputed that characterization, saying that the NSC carried
on with no interruption or diminution of focus. “Nobody got paralyzed by grief,” a high-ranking official said. “We all did our jobs.”

Rice declined to comment on White House deliberations or other sensitive matters but said that the administration always planned to respond to Russia, regardless of the outcome of the election. “We felt it was on our watch and that we had to do something about it. It was our responsibility,” Rice said.

Whatever the case, work on Russia did not resume in earnest until after Thanksgiving, in part because Obama made his last foreign trip.

Rice again ordered NSC staffers to finalize a “menu” of punitive
measures to use against Moscow. The list that took shape was a distillation of ideas that had been circulating for months across three main categories: cyber, economic and diplomatic.

Again, the discussion ran into roadblocks.

Spy agencies wanted to maintain their penetrations of Russian networks, not expose them in a cyber-fusillade.

Treasury Department officials devised plans that would hit entire sectors of Russia's economy. One preliminary suggestion called for targeting technology companies including Kaspersky Lab, the Moscow-based cybersecurity firm. But skeptics worried that the harm could spill into Europe and pointed out that U.S. companies used Kaspersky systems and software.

Several senior administration officials called for imposing sanctions on Putin personally or releasing financial records or other information that would embarrass him. Some objected that the latter proposal would send the wrong message — the United States would be engaging in the same behavior it was condemning. In any case, it was not clear how long it would take U.S. spy agencies to assemble such a Putin dossier.

“By December, those of us working on this for a long time were demoralized,” said an administration official involved in the developing punitive options.

Then the tenor began to shift.

On Dec. 9, Obama ordered a comprehensive review by U.S. intelligence agencies of Russian interference in U.S. elections going back to 2008, with a plan to make some of the findings public.
A week later, in one of Obama’s final news briefings, he expressed irritation that such a consequential election “came to be dominated by a bunch of these leaks.” He scolded news organizations for an “obsession” with titillating material about the Democrats that had dominated coverage.

Then he unloaded on Moscow. “The Russians can’t change us or significantly weaken us,” he said. “They are a smaller country. They are a weaker country. Their economy doesn’t produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms.”

It was a rare outburst for Obama, one that came amid a wave of internal second-guessing, finger-pointing from members of the defeated Clinton campaign, and the post-election posturing of Putin and Trump.

There was another factor at work, however.

Obama’s decision to order a comprehensive report on Moscow’s interference from U.S. spy agencies had prompted analysts to go back through their agencies’ files, scouring for previously overlooked clues.

The effort led to a flurry of new, disturbing reports — many of them presented in the President’s Daily Brief — about Russia’s subversion of the 2016 race. The emerging picture enabled policymakers to begin seeing the Russian campaign in broader terms, as a comprehensive plot sweeping in its scope.

Ben Rhodes, former deputy national security adviser, said that the DNC email penetrations were initially thought to be in the same vein as previous Russian hacking efforts against targets including the State Department and White House.
“In many ways … we dealt with this as a cyberthreat and focused on protecting our cyber infrastructure,” Rhodes said in an interview. “Meanwhile, the Russians were playing this much bigger game, which included elements like released hacked materials, political propaganda and propagating fake news, which they’d pursued in other countries.”

“We weren’t able to put all of those pieces together in real time,” Rhodes said, “and in many ways that complete picture is still being filled in.” Rhodes declined to discuss any sensitive information.

Obama’s darkened mood, the intelligence findings and the approaching transfer of power gave new urgency to NSC deliberations. In mid-December, as Cabinet members took turns citing
drawbacks to various proposals for retaliating against Russia, Rice
grew impatient and began cutting them off.

“We're not talking anymore. We're acting,” she said, according to one
participant.

Rice moved swiftly through a list of proposals that had survived
months of debate, a menu that allowed principals to vote for what
one participant described as “heavy, medium and light” options.

Among those in the Situation Room were Clapper, Brennan and
Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe. Rice challenged them go to
the “max of their comfort zones,” a second participant said.

Economic sanctions, originally aimed only at Russia’s military
intelligence service, were expanded to include the FSB, a domestic
successor to the KGB. Four Russian intelligence officials and three
companies with links to those services were also named as targets.

The FBI had long lobbied to close two Russian compounds in the
United States — one in Maryland and another in New York — on
the grounds that both were used for espionage and placed an enor-
mous surveillance burden on the bureau.

The FBI was also responsible for generating the list of Russian
operatives working under diplomatic cover to expel, drawn from
a roster the bureau maintains of suspected Russian intelligence
agents in the United States.

Cabinet officials were prompted to vote on whether to close one
Russian compound or two, whether to kick out around 10 suspected
Russian agents, 20 or 35.

Kerry laid out his department’s concerns. The U.S. ambassador to
Russia, John Tefft, had sent a cable warning that Moscow would inevitably expel the same number of Americans from Moscow and that departures of that magnitude would impair the embassy’s ability to function.

The objections were dismissed, and Rice submitted a plan to Obama calling for the seizure of both Russian facilities and the expulsion of 35 suspected spies. Obama signed off on the package and announced the punitive measures on Dec. 29, while on vacation in Hawaii.

By then, the still-forming Trump administration was becoming entangled by questions about contacts with Moscow. On or around that same day that Obama imposed sanctions, Trump’s designated national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, told the Russian ambassador by phone that the sanctions would soon be revisited. Flynn’s false statements about that conversation later cost him his job.

The report that Obama had commissioned was released a week later, on Jan. 6. It was based largely on the work done by the task force Brennan had established and made public what the CIA had concluded in August, that “Putin and the Russian government aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton.”

It also carried a note of warning: “We assess Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the U.S. election to future influence efforts worldwide.”

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Sanctions’ ‘minimal’ impact

The punitive measures got several days of media attention before
the spotlight returned to Trump, his still-forming administration and, later, the initial rumblings of the Russia crisis that has become a consuming issue for the Trump White House.

But the package of measures approved by Obama, and the process by which they were selected and implemented, were more complex than initially understood.

The expulsions and compound seizures were originally devised as ways to retaliate against Moscow not for election interference but for an escalating campaign of harassment of American diplomats and intelligence operatives. U.S. officials often endured hostile treatment, but the episodes had become increasingly menacing and violent.

In one previously undisclosed incident on July 6, a Russian military helicopter dropped from the sky to make multiple passes just feet over the hood of a vehicle being driven by the U.S. defense attache, who was accompanied by colleagues, on a stretch of road between Murmansk and Pechenga in northern Russia. The attempt at intimidation was captured on photos the Americans took through the windshield.

An even more harrowing encounter took place the prior month, when a CIA operative returning by taxi to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow was tackled and thrown to the ground by a uniformed FSB guard. In a video aired on Russian television, the U.S. operative can be seen struggling to drag himself across the embassy threshold and onto U.S. sovereign territory. He sustained a broken shoulder in the attack.

Though conceived as retaliation for those incidents, the expulsions were adapted and included in the election-related package. The roster of expelled spies included several operatives who were suspected
of playing a role in Russia’s election interference from within the United States, officials said. They declined to elaborate.

More broadly, the list of 35 names focused heavily on Russians known to have technical skills. Their names and bios were laid out on a dossier delivered to senior White House officials and Cabinet secretaries, although the list was modified at the last minute to reduce the number of expulsions from Russia’s U.N. mission in New York and add more names from its facilities in Washington and San Francisco.
The compounds were even higher on the FBI’s wish list.

At one point in the White House deliberations, intelligence analysts used aerial images of the facilities to show how they had been modified to enhance their espionage capabilities. Slides displayed in the Situation Room showed new chimneys and other features, all presumed to allow for the installation of more-sophisticated eavesdropping equipment aimed at U.S. naval facilities and the NSA headquarters at Fort Meade in Maryland.

Rice pointed to the FBI’s McCabe and said: “You guys have been begging to do this for years. Now is your chance.”

The administration gave Russia 24 hours to evacuate the sites, and FBI agents watched as fleets of trucks loaded with cargo passed through the compounds’ gates.

When FBI agents entered the sites, they found them stripped of antennas, electronics, computers, file cabinets and other gear, officials said, their hasty removal leaving visible markings on floors, tables and walls.

Economic sanctions are widely seen as the United States’ most potent lever, short of military force. Russia’s economy is dwarfed by that of the United States, and nearly every major Russian institution and oligarch depends to some degree on access to U.S. and Western financial institutions, networks and credit.

Sanctions that the United States and Europe imposed on Russia in 2014 for its actions in Ukraine were damaging. Coinciding with a sharp drop in oil prices, those measures contributed to a 4 percent contraction in the Russian economy and sent its reserves plunging.

The election-related sanctions, by contrast, have had no such impact.
Officials involved in designing them said that the main targets — Russia’s foreign and military intelligence services, the GRU and FSB, and senior officials at those agencies — have few known holdings abroad or vulnerable assets to freeze.

“I don’t think any of us thought of sanctions as being a primary way of expressing our disapproval” for the election interference, said a senior administration official involved in the decision. “Going after their intelligence services was not about economic impact. It was symbolic.”

More than any other measure, that decision has become a source of regret to senior administration officials directly involved in the Russia debate. The outcome has left the impression that Obama saw Russia’s military meddling in Ukraine as more deserving of severe punishment than its subversion of a U.S. presidential race.

“What is the greater threat to our system of government?” said a former high-ranking administration official, noting that Obama and his advisers knew from projections formulated by the Treasury Department that the impact of the election-related economic sanctions would be “minimal.”

A U.S. cyber-weapon

The most difficult measure to evaluate is one that Obama alluded to in only the most oblique fashion when announcing the U.S. response.

“We will continue to take a variety of actions at a time and place of our choosing, some of which will not be publicized,” he said in a statement released by the White House.
He was referring, in part, to a cyber operation that was designed to be detected by Moscow but not cause significant damage, officials said. The operation, which entailed implanting computer code in sensitive computer systems that Russia was bound to find, served only as a reminder to Moscow of the United States’ cyber reach.

But Obama also signed the secret finding, officials said, authorizing a new covert program involving the NSA, CIA and U.S. Cyber Command.

Obama declined to comment for this article, but a spokesman issued a statement: “This situation was taken extremely seriously, as is evident by President Obama raising this issue directly with President Putin; 17 intelligence agencies issuing an extraordinary public statement; our homeland security officials working relentlessly to bolster the cyber defenses of voting infrastructure around the country; the President directing a comprehensive intelligence review, and ultimately issuing a robust response including shutting down two Russian compounds, sanctioning nine Russian entities and individuals, and ejecting 35 Russian diplomats from the country.”

The cyber operation is still in its early stages and involves deploying “implants” in Russian networks deemed “important to the adversary and that would cause them pain and discomfort if they were disrupted,” a former U.S. official said.

The implants were developed by the NSA and designed so that they could be triggered remotely as part of retaliatory cyber-strike in the face of Russian aggression, whether an attack on a power grid or interference in a future presidential race.

Officials familiar with the measures said that there was concern among some in the administration that the damage caused by the implants could be difficult to contain.
As a result, the administration requested a legal review, which concluded that the devices could be controlled well enough that their deployment would be considered “proportional” in varying scenarios of Russian provocation, a requirement under international law.

The operation was described as long-term, taking months to position the implants and requiring maintenance thereafter. Under the rules of covert action, Obama's signature was all that was necessary to set the operation in motion.

U.S. intelligence agencies do not need further approval from Trump, and officials said that he would have to issue a countermanding order to stop it. The officials said that they have seen no indication that Trump has done so.

*Karen DeYoung and Julie Tate contributed to this report.*
Trump crafted son’s statement on Russian contact

Some advisers fear his intervention could place him in legal jeopardy

by Ashley Parker, Carol D. Leonnig, Philip Rucker and Tom Hamburger

On the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Germany last month, President Trump’s advisers discussed how to respond to a new revelation that Trump’s oldest son had met with a Russian lawyer during the 2016 campaign — a disclosure the advisers knew carried political and potentially legal peril.

The strategy, the advisers agreed, should be for Donald Trump Jr. to release a statement to get ahead of the story. They wanted to be truthful, so the account couldn’t be repudiated later if the full details emerged.

But within hours, at the president’s direction, the plan changed.

Flying home from Germany on July 8 aboard Air Force One, Trump personally dictated a statement in which Trump Jr. said that he and the Russian lawyer had “primarily discussed a program about the adoption of Russian children” when they met in June 2016, according to multiple people with knowledge of the deliberations. The statement, issued to the New York Times as it prepared an article, emphasized that the subject of the meeting was “not a campaign issue at the time.”

The claims were later shown to be misleading.

Over the next three days, multiple accounts of the meeting were provided to the news media as public pressure mounted, with Trump Jr. ultimately acknowledging that he had accepted the meeting after receiving an email promising damaging information about Hillary Clinton as part of a Russian government effort to help his father’s campaign.

The extent of the president’s personal intervention in his son’s response, the details of which have not previously been reported, adds to a series of actions that some advisers fear could place him and some members of his inner circle in legal jeopardy.

As special counsel Robert S. Mueller III looks into potential obstruction of jus-
Trump dictated his son’s statement
tice as part of his broader investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, these advisers worry that the president’s direct involvement leaves him needlessly vulnerable to allegations of a coverup.

“This was ... unnecessary,” said one of the president’s advisers, who like most other people interviewed for this article spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal deliberations. “Now someone can claim he’s the one who attempted to mislead. Somebody can argue the president is saying he doesn’t want you to say the whole truth.”

Trump has already come under criticism for steps he has taken to challenge and undercut the Russia investigation.

He fired FBI Director James B. Comey on May 9 after a private meeting in which Comey said the president asked him if he could end the investigation of ousted national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats told associates that Trump asked him in March if he could intervene with Comey to get the bureau to back off its focus on Flynn. In addition, Trump has repeatedly criticized Attorney General Jeff Sessions for recusing himself from overseeing the FBI’s Russian investigation — a decision that was one factor leading to the appointment of Mueller. And he has privately discussed his power to issue pardons, including for himself, and explored potential avenues for undercutting Mueller’s work.

Although misleading the public or the news media is not a crime, advisers to Trump and his family told The Washington Post that they fear any indication that Trump was seeking to hide information about contacts between his campaign and Russians almost inevitably would draw

President Trump and first lady Melania Trump head to Air Force One for their departure from the G-20 summit in Hamburg last month.
additional scrutiny from Mueller.

Trump, they say, is increasingly acting as his own lawyer, strategist and publicist, often disregarding the recommendations of the professionals he has hired.

“He refuses to sit still,” the presidential adviser said. “He doesn’t think he’s in any legal jeopardy, so he really views this as a political problem he is going to solve by himself.”

Trump has said that the Russia investigation is “the greatest witch hunt in political history,” calling it an elaborate hoax created by Democrats to explain why Clinton lost an election she should have won.

Because Trump believes he is innocent, some advisers explained, he therefore does not think he is at any legal risk for a coverup. In his mind, they said, there is nothing to conceal.

The White House directed all questions for this article to the president’s legal team.

One of Trump’s attorneys, Jay Sekulow, declined to discuss the specifics of the president’s actions and his role in crafting his son’s statement about the Russian contact. Sekulow issued a one-sentence statement in response to a list of detailed questions from The Post.

“Apart from being of no consequence, the characterizations are misinformed, inaccurate, and not pertinent,” Sekulow’s statement read.

Trump Jr. did not respond to requests for comment. His attorney, Alan Futerfas, told The Post that he and his client “were fully prepared and absolutely prepared to make a fulsome statement” about the meeting, what led up to it and what was discussed.

Asked about Trump intervening, Futerfas said, “I have no evidence to support that theory.” He described the process of drafting a statement as “a communal situation that involved communications people and various lawyers.”

Peter Zeidenberg, the deputy special prosecutor who investigated the George W. Bush administration’s leak of CIA operative Valerie Plame’s identity, said Mueller will have to dig into the crafting of Trump Jr.’s statement aboard Air Force One.

Prosecutors typically assume that any misleading statement is an effort to throw investigators off the track, Zeidenberg said.

“The thing that really strikes me about this is the stupidity of involving the president,” Zeidenberg said. “They are still treating this like a family-run business and they have a PR problem. . . . What they don’t seem to understand is this is a criminal investigation involving all of them.”

Advocating for transparency

The debate about how to deal with the June 2016 Trump Tower meeting began weeks before any news organizations began to ask questions about it.

Kushner’s legal team first learned about the meeting when doing research to respond to congressional requests for information. Congressional investigators wanted to know about any contacts the
president’s son-in-law and senior adviser had with Russian officials or business people.

Kushner’s lawyers came across what they immediately recognized would eventually become a problematic story. A string of emails showed Kushner attended a meeting with a Russian lawyer at Trump Tower in the midst of the campaign — one he had failed to disclose. Trump Jr. had arranged it, and then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort had also attended.

To compound what was, at best, a public relations fiasco, the emails, which had not yet surfaced publicly, showed Trump Jr. responding to the prospect of negative information on Clinton from Russia: “I love it.”

Lawyers and advisers for Trump, his son and son-in-law gamed out strategies for disclosing the information to try to minimize the fallout of these new links between the Trump family and Russia, according to people familiar with the deliberations.

Hope Hicks, the White House director of strategic communications and one of the president’s most trusted and loyal aides, and Josh Raffel, a White House spokesman who works closely with Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump, huddled with Kushner’s lawyers, and they advocated for a more transparent approach, according to people with knowledge of the conversations.

In one scenario, these people said, Kushner’s team talked about sharing everything, including the contents of the emails, with a mainstream news organization.

Hicks and Raffel declined to comment. Kushner attorney Abbe Lowell also declined to comment.

The president’s outside legal team, led by Marc Kasowitz, had suggested that the details be given to Circa, an online news organization that the Kasowitz team thought would be friendly to Trump. Circa had inquired in previous days about the meeting, according to people familiar with the discussions.

The president’s legal team planned to cast the June 2016 meeting as a potential setup by Democratic operatives hoping to entrap Trump Jr. and, by extension, the presumptive Republican nominee, according to people familiar with discussions.

Kasowitz declined to comment for this article, as did a Circa spokesman.

Consensus overruled

Circumstances changed when the New York Times began asking about the Trump Tower meeting, though advisers believed that the newspaper knew few of the details. While the president, Kushner and Ivanka

“They are still treating this like a family-run business and they have a PR problem. . . . What they don’t seem to understand is this is a criminal investigation involving all of them.”

Peter Zeidenberg, lawyer
Trump were attending the G-20 summit in Germany, the Times asked for White House comment on the impetus and reason for the meeting.

During breaks away from the summit, Kushner and Ivanka Trump gathered with Hicks and Raffel to discuss Kushner’s response to the inquiry, according to people with knowledge of the discussions. Kushner’s legal team joined at times by phone.

Hicks also spoke by phone with Trump Jr. Again, say people familiar with the conversations, Kushner’s team concluded that the best strategy would be to err on the side of transparency, because they believed the complete story would eventually emerge.

The discussions among the president’s advisers consumed much of the day, and they continued as they prepared to board Air Force One that evening for the flight home.

But before everyone boarded the plane, Trump had overruled the consensus, according to people with knowledge of the events.

It remains unclear exactly how much the president knew at the time of the flight about Trump Jr.’s meeting.

The president directed that Trump Jr.’s statement to the Times describe the meeting as unimportant. He wanted the statement to say that the meeting had been initiated by the Russian lawyer and primarily was about her pet issue — the adoption of Russian children.

Air Force One took off from Germany shortly after 6 p.m. — about noon in Washington. In a forward cabin, Trump was busy working on his son’s statement, according to people with knowledge of events. The president dictated the statement to Hicks, who served as a go-between with Trump Jr., who was not on the plane, sharing edits between the two men, according to people with knowledge of the discussions.

In the early afternoon, Eastern time, Trump Jr.’s team put out the statement to the Times. It was four sentences long, describing the encounter as a “short, introductory meeting.”

“We primarily discussed a program about the adoption of Russian children that was active and popular with American families years ago and was since ended by the Russian government, but it was not a campaign issue at the time and there was no follow up,” the statement read.

Trump Jr. went on to say: “I was asked to attend the meeting by an acquaintance, but was not told the name of the person I would be meeting with beforehand.”

Over the next hour, word spread through emails and calls to other Trump family advisers and lawyers about the statement that Trump Jr. had sent to the Times.

Some lawyers for the president and for Kushner were surprised and frustrated, advisers later learned. According to people briefed on the dispute, some lawyers tried to reach Futerfas and their clients and began asking why the president had been involved.

Also on the flight, Kushner worked
with his team — including one of his lawyers, who called in to the plane.

His lawyers have said that Kushner’s initial omission of the meeting was an error, but that in an effort to be fully transparent, he had updated his government filing to include “this meeting with a Russian person, which he briefly attended at the request of his brother-in-law Donald Trump Jr.” Kushner’s legal team referred all questions about the meeting itself to Trump Jr.

The Times’ story revealing the existence of the June 2016 meeting was posted online about 4 p.m. Eastern time. Roughly four hours later, Air Force One touched down at Joint Base Andrews. Trump’s family members and advisers departed the plane, and they knew the problem they had once hoped to contain would soon grow bigger.

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Trump crafted son’s statement on Russian contact

Acclaimed playwright and film actor

Police continue to reject Trump’s comments on brutality

Trump dictated his son’s statement

IN THE NEWS.
In the final days before Donald Trump was sworn in as president, members of his inner circle pleaded with him to acknowledge publicly what U.S. intelligence agencies had already concluded — that Russia’s interference in the 2016 election was real.

Holding impromptu interventions in Trump’s 26th-floor corner office at Trump Tower, advisers — including Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and designated chief of staff, Reince Priebus — prodded the president-elect to accept the findings that the nation’s spy chiefs had personally presented to him on Jan. 6.
They sought to convince Trump that he could affirm the validity of the intelligence without diminishing his electoral win, according to three officials involved in the sessions. More important, they said that doing so was the only way to put the matter behind him politically and free him to pursue his goal of closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“This was part of the normalization process,” one participant said. “There was a big effort to get him to be a standard president.”

But as aides persisted, Trump became agitated. He railed that the intelligence couldn’t be trusted and scoffed at the suggestion that his candidacy had been propelled by forces other than his own strategy, message and charisma.

Told that members of his incoming Cabinet had already publicly backed the intelligence report on Russia, Trump shot back, “So what?” Admitting that the Kremlin had hacked Democratic Party emails, he said, was a “trap.”
As Trump addressed journalists on Jan. 11 in the lobby of Trump Tower, he came as close as he ever would to grudging acceptance. “As far as hacking, I think it was Russia,” he said, adding that “we also get hacked by other countries and other people.”

As hedged as those words were, Trump regretted them almost immediately. “It’s not me,” he said to aides afterward. “It wasn’t right.”

Nearly a year into his presidency, Trump continues to reject the evidence that Russia waged an assault on a pillar of American democracy and supported his run for the White House.

The result is without obvious parallel in U.S. history, a situation in which the personal insecurities of the president — and his refusal to accept what even many in his administration regard as objective reality — have impaired the government’s response to a national security threat. The repercussions radiate across the government.

Rather than search for ways to deter Kremlin attacks or safeguard U.S. elections, Trump has waged his own campaign to discredit the case that Russia poses any threat and he has resisted or attempted to roll back efforts to hold Moscow to account.

His administration has moved to undo at least some of the sanctions the previous administration imposed on Russia for its election interference, exploring the return of two Russian compounds in the United States that President Barack Obama had seized — the measure that had most galled Moscow. Months later, when Congress moved to impose additional penalties on Moscow, Trump opposed the measures fiercely.

Trump has never convened a Cabinet-level meeting on Russian interference or what to do about it, administration officials
said. Although the issue has been discussed at lower levels at the National Security Council, one former high-ranking Trump administration official said there is an unspoken understanding within the NSC that to raise the matter is to acknowledge its validity, which the president would see as an affront.

Trump’s stance on the election is part of a broader entanglement with Moscow that has defined the first year of his presidency. He continues to pursue an elusive bond with Putin, which he sees as critical to dealing with North Korea, Iran and other issues. “Having Russia in a friendly posture,” he said last month, “is an asset to the world and an asset to our country.”

His position has alienated close American allies and often undercut members of his Cabinet — all against the backdrop of a criminal probe into possible ties between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin.
This account of the Trump administration’s reaction to Russia’s interference and policies toward Moscow is based on interviews with more than 50 current and former U.S. officials, many of whom had senior roles in the Trump campaign and transition team or have been in high-level positions at the White House or at national security agencies. Most agreed to speak only on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the subject.

Trump administration officials defended the approach with Russia, insisting that their policies and actions have been tougher than those pursued by Obama but without unnecessarily combative language or posture. “Our approach is that we don’t irritate Russia, we deter Russia,” a senior administration official said. “The last administration had it exactly backwards.”

White House officials cast the president’s refusal to acknowledge Russian interference in the election as an understandably human reaction. “The president obviously feels . . . that the idea that he’s been put into office by Vladimir Putin is pretty insulting,” said a second senior administration official. But his views are “not a constraint” on the government’s ability to respond to future election threats, the official said. “Our first order in dealing with Russia is trying to counter a lot of the destabilizing activity that Russia engages in.”

Others questioned how such an effort could succeed when the rationale for that objective is routinely rejected by the president. Michael V. Hayden, who served as CIA director under President George W. Bush, has described the Russian interference as the political equivalent of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, an event that exposed a previously unimagined vulnerability and required a unified American response.

“What the president has to say is, ‘We know the Russians did it,
they know they did it, I know they did it, and we will not rest until we learn everything there is to know about how and do everything possible to prevent it from happening again,’” Hayden said in an interview. Trump “has never said anything close to that and will never say anything close to that.”

‘More than worth the effort’

The feeble American response has registered with the Kremlin.

U.S. officials said that a stream of intelligence from sources inside the Russian government indicates that Putin and his lieutenants regard the 2016 “active measures” campaign — as the Russians describe such covert propaganda operations — as a resounding, if incomplete, success.

Moscow has not achieved some its most narrow and immediate goals. The annexation of Crimea from Ukraine has not been recognized. Sanctions imposed for Russian intervention in Ukraine remain in place. Additional penalties have been mandated by Congress. And a wave of diplomatic retaliation has cost Russia access to additional diplomatic facilities, including its San Francisco consulate.

But overall, U.S. officials said, the Kremlin believes it got a staggering return on an operation that by some estimates cost less than $500,000 to execute and was organized around two main objectives — destabilizing U.S. democracy and preventing Hillary Clinton, who is despised by Putin, from reaching the White House.

The bottom line for Putin, said one U.S. official briefed on the stream of post-election intelligence, is that the operation was “more than worth the effort.”
The Russian operation seemed intended to aggravate political polarization and racial tensions and to diminish U.S. influence abroad. The United States’ closest alliances are frayed, and the Oval Office is occupied by a disruptive politician who frequently praises his counterpart in Russia.

“Putin has to believe this was the most successful intelligence operation in the history of Russian or Soviet intelligence,” said Andrew Weiss, a former adviser on Russia in the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations who is now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “It has driven the American political system into a crisis that will last years.”

U.S. officials declined to discuss whether the stream of recent intelligence on Russia has been shared with Trump. Current and for-
mer officials said that his daily intelligence update — known as the
president’s daily brief, or PDB — is often structured to avoid upset-
ting him.

Russia-related intelligence that might draw Trump’s ire is in some
cases included only in the written assessment and not raised orally,
said a former senior intelligence official familiar with the matter.
In other cases, Trump’s main briefer — a veteran CIA analyst —
adjusts the order of his presentation and text, aiming to soften the
impact.

“If you talk about Russia, meddling, interference — that takes the
PDB off the rails,” said a second former senior U.S. intelligence
official.

Brian Hale, a spokesman for the Office of the Director of National
Intelligence, said the briefing is “written by senior-level, career
intelligence officers,” and that the intelligence community “always
provides objective intelligence — including on Russia — to the
president and his staff.”

Trump’s aversion to the intelligence, and the dilemma that poses
for top spies, has created a confusing dissonance on issues related
to Russia. The CIA continues to stand by its conclusions about the
election, for example, even as the agency’s director, Mike Pompeo,
frequently makes comments that seem to diminish or distort those
findings.

In October, Pompeo declared the intelligence community had
concluded that Russia’s meddling “did not affect the outcome of the
election.” In fact, spy agencies intentionally steered clear of address-
ing that question.
Presenting the intelligence

On Jan. 6, two weeks before Trump was sworn in as president, the nation's top intelligence officials boarded an aircraft at Joint Base Andrews on the outskirts of Washington to travel to New York for one of the most delicate briefings they would deliver in their decades-long careers.

Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr., CIA Director John Brennan and National Security Agency chief Michael S. Rogers flew together aboard an Air Force 737. FBI Director James B. Comey traveled separately on an FBI Gulfstream aircraft, planning to extend his stay for meetings with bureau officials.
The mood was heavy. The four men had convened a virtual meeting the previous evening, speaking by secure videoconference to plan their presentation to the incoming president of a classified report on Russia’s election interference and its pro-Trump objective.

During the campaign, Trump had alternately dismissed the idea of Russian involvement — saying a hack of the Democratic National Committee was just as likely carried out by “somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds” — and prodded the Kremlin to double down on its operation and unearth additional Clinton emails.

The officials had already briefed Obama and members of Congress. As they made their way across Manhattan in separate convoys of black SUVs, they braced for a blowup.

“We were prepared to be thrown out,” Clapper said in an interview.

Instead, the session was oddly serene.

The officials were escorted into a spacious conference room on the 14th floor of Trump Tower. Trump took a seat at one end of a large table, with Vice President-elect Mike Pence at the other. Among the others present were Priebus, Pompeo and designated national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Following a rehearsed plan, Clapper functioned as moderator, yielding to Brennan and others on key points in the briefing, which covered the most highly classified information U.S. spy agencies had assembled, including an extraordinary CIA stream of intelligence that had captured Putin’s specific instructions on the operation.

Trump seemed, at least for the moment, to acquiesce.
“He was affable, courteous, complimentary,” Clapper said. “He didn’t bring up the 400-pound guy.”

A copy of the report was left with Trump’s designated intelligence briefer. But there was another, more sensitive matter left to cover.

Clapper and Comey had initially planned to remain together with Trump while discussing an infamous dossier that included salacious allegations about the incoming president.

It had been commissioned by an opposition research firm in Washington that had enlisted a former British intelligence officer to gather material. As The Washington Post reported in October, the research was paid for by the Clinton campaign and the DNC.

But in the end, Comey felt he should handle the matter with Trump alone, saying that the dossier was being scrutinized exclusively by
the FBI. After the room emptied, Comey explained that the dossier had not been corroborated and that its contents had not influenced the intelligence community’s findings — but that the president needed to know it was in wide circulation in Washington.

Senior officials would subsequently wonder whether the decision to leave that conversation to Comey helped poison his relationship with the incoming president. When the dossier was posted online four days later by the news site BuzzFeed, Trump lashed out the next morning in a 4:48 a.m. Twitter blast.

“Intelligence agencies never should have allowed this fake news to ‘leak’ into the public,” Trump said. “One last shot at me. Are we living in Nazi Germany?” The Post was one of several news organizations that had been briefed on key allegations included in the dossier months earlier and had been attempting to verify them.

After leaving the Jan. 6 meeting at Trump Tower, Comey had climbed into his car and began composing a memo. “I knew there might come a day when I would need a record of what happened, not just to defend myself but to defend the FBI and our integrity as an institution,” he testified to Congress in June. It was the first of multiple memos he would write documenting his interactions with Trump.

Clapper’s office released an abbreviated public version of the intelligence report later that day. Trump issued a statement saying that “Russia, China” and “other countries” had sought to penetrate the cyberdefenses of U.S. institutions, including the DNC.

In their Trump Tower interventions, senior aides had sought to cement his seeming acceptance of the intelligence. But as the first year of his presidency progressed, Trump became only more adamantly in his rejections of it.
In November, during a 12-day trip to Asia, Trump signaled that he believed Putin’s word over that of U.S. intelligence.

“He said he didn’t meddle,” Trump said to reporters aboard Air Force One after he and Putin spoke on the sidelines of a summit in Vietnam. “Every time he sees me, he says, ‘I didn’t do that,’ and I believe, I really believe, that when he tells me that, he means it.”

As those remarks roiled Washington, Trump sought to calm the controversy without fully conceding the accuracy of the intelligence on Russia. He also aimed a parting shot at the spy chiefs who had visited him in January in New York.

“As to whether I believe it or not,” he said the next day, “I’m with our agencies, especially as currently constituted with their leadership.”

‘Don’t walk that last 5½ feet’

In the early days of his presidency, Trump surrounded himself with aides and advisers who reinforced his affinity for Russia and Putin, though for disparate reasons not always connected to the views of the president.

Flynn, the national security adviser, saw Russia as an unfairly maligned world power and believed that the United States should set aside its differences with Moscow so the two could focus on higher priorities, including battling Islamist terrorism.

Some on the NSC, including Middle East adviser Derek Harvey, urged pursuing a “grand bargain” with Russia in Syria as part of an effort to drive a wedge into Moscow’s relationship with Iran. Harvey is no longer in the administration.
Others had more idiosyncratic impulses. Kevin Harrington, a former associate of Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel brought in to shape national security strategy, saw close ties with oil- and gas-rich Russia as critical to surviving an energy apocalypse — a fate that officials who worked with him said he discussed frequently and depicted as inevitable.

The tilt of the staff began to change when Flynn was forced to resign after just 24 days on the job for falsehoods about his conversations with the Russian ambassador. His replacement, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, had more conventional foreign policy views that included significant skepticism of Moscow.

The change helped ease the turmoil that had characterized the NSC but set up internal conflicts on Russia-related issues that seemed to interfere with Trump’s pursuit of a friendship with Putin. Among them was the administration’s position on NATO.

The alliance, built around a pledge of mutual defense against Soviet or Russian aggression among the United States and its European allies, became a flash point in internal White House battles. McMaster, an ardent NATO supporter, struggled to fend off attacks on the alliance and its members by Trump’s political advisers.

The president’s chief strategist, Stephen K. Bannon, moved to undermine support for NATO within weeks of arriving at the White House. After securing a position on the NSC, Bannon ordered officials to compile a table of arrears — alleged deficits on defense
spending by every NATO member going back 67 years. Officials protested that such a calculation was impractical, and they persuaded Bannon to accept a partial list documenting underspending dating from 2007.

Bannon and McMaster clashed in front of Trump during an Oval Office discussion about NATO in the spring, officials said. Trump, sitting behind his desk, was voicing frustration that NATO member states were not meeting their defense spending obligations under the treaty. Bannon went further, describing Europe as “nothing more than a glorified protectorate.”

McMaster snapped at Bannon. “Why are you such an apologist for Russia?” he asked, according to two officials with knowledge of the exchange. Bannon shot back that his position had “nothing to do with Russians” and later told colleagues how much he relished such confrontations with McMaster, saying, “I love living rent-free in his head.”

Bannon and his allies also maneuvered to sabotage displays of unity with the alliance. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg arrived for an April visit at the White House, McMaster’s team prepared remarks for Trump that included an endorsement of Article 5 — the core NATO provision calling for members to come to one another’s defense.

But the language was stripped out at the last minute by NATO critics inside the administration who argued that “it didn’t sound presidential enough,” one senior U.S. official said. A month later, Stephen Miller, a White House adviser close to Bannon, carried out a similar editing operation in Brussels where Trump spoke at a dedication ceremony for NATO’s gleaming new headquarters.

Standing before twisted steel wreckage from the World Trade Cen-
ter that memorialized NATO’s commitment to defend the United States after the 9/11 attacks, Trump made no mention of any U.S. commitment to mutual defense.

Trump finally did so in June during a meeting with the president of Romania. Officials said that in that case, McMaster clung to the president’s side until a joint news conference was underway, blocking Miller from Trump and the text. A senior White House official said that Trump has developed a good relationship with Stoltenberg and often praises him in private.

On sensitive matters related to Russia, senior advisers have at times adopted what one official described as a policy of “don’t walk that last 5½ feet” — meaning to avoid entering the Oval Office and giving Trump a chance to erupt or overrule on issues that can be resolved by subordinates.

Another former U.S. official described being enlisted to contact the German government before Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit at the White House in March. The outreach had two aims, the official said — to warn Merkel that her encounter with Trump would probably be acrimonious because of their diverging views on refugees, trade and other issues, but also to urge her to press Trump on U.S. support for NATO.

The signature moment of the trip came during a brief photo appearance in which Trump wore a dour expression and appeared to spurn Merkel’s effort to shake his hand, though Trump later said he had not noticed the gesture.

His demeanor with the German leader was in striking contrast with his encounters with Putin and other authoritarian figures. “Who are the three guys in the world he most admires? President Xi [Jinping] of China, [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan and
Putin,” one Trump adviser said. “They’re all the same guy.”

Merkel has never fit into that Trump pantheon. Before her arrival, senior White House aides witnessed an odd scene that some saw as an omen for the visit. As McMaster and a dozen other top aides met with Trump in the Oval Office to outline issues Merkel was likely to raise, the president grew impatient, stood up and walked into an adjoining bathroom.

Trump left the bathroom door open, according to officials familiar with the incident, instructing McMaster to raise his voice and keep talking. A senior White House official said the president entered the restroom and merely “took a glance in the mirror, as this was before a public event.”

McMaster gained an internal ally on Russia in March with the hiring of Fiona Hill as the top Russia adviser on the NSC. A frequent critic of the Kremlin, Hill was best known as the author of a
respected biography of Putin and was seen as a reassuring selection among Russia hard-liners.

Her relationship with Trump, however, was strained from the start.

In one of her first encounters with the president, an Oval Office meeting in preparation for a call with Putin on Syria, Trump appeared to mistake Hill for a member of the clerical staff, handing her a memo he had marked up and instructing her to rewrite it.

When Hill responded with a perplexed look, Trump became irritated with what he interpreted as insubordination, according to officials who witnessed the exchange. As she walked away in confusion, Trump exploded and motioned for McMaster to intervene.

McMaster followed Hill out the door and scolded her, officials said. Later he and a few close staffers met to explore ways to repair Hill’s damaged relationship with the president.
Hill’s standing was further damaged when she was forced to defend members of her staff suspected of disloyalty after details about Trump’s Oval Office meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak — in which the president revealed highly classified information to his Russian guests — were leaked to The Post.

The White House subsequently tightened the circle of aides involved in meetings with Russian officials. Trump was accompanied only by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during a meeting with Putin at a July summit of Group of 20 nations in Hamburg. In prior administrations, the president’s top aide on Russia was typically present for such encounters, but Hill has frequently been excluded.

A senior administration official said that the NSC “was not sidelined as a result” of Hill’s difficult encounters with Trump, that Hill is regularly included in briefings with the president and that she and her staff “continue to play an important role on Russia policy.”

An insult to Moscow

White House officials insist that the Trump administration has adopted a tougher stance toward Moscow than the Obama administration on important fronts.

They point to Trump’s decision, after a chemical weapons attack in Syria, to approve a U.S. military strike on a base where Russian personnel and equipment were present. They cite Trump’s decision in early August to sign legislation imposing additional economic sanctions on Moscow and steps taken by the State Department at the end of that month ordering three Russian diplomatic facilities — two trade offices and the consulate in San Francisco — closed. They also said that the NSC is preparing options for the president to deal
with the threat of Russian interference in American elections.

“Look at our actions,” a senior administration official said in an interview. “We’re pushing back against the Russians.”

Senior Trump officials have struggled to explain how. In congressional testimony in October, Attorney General Jeff Sessions was pressed on whether the administration had done enough to prevent Russian interference in the future. “Probably not,” Sessions said. “And the matter is so complex that for most of us we are not able to fully grasp the technical dangers that are out there.”

The administration’s accomplishments are to a large measure offset by complicating factors — Trump had little choice but to sign the sanctions — and competing examples. Among them is the administration’s persistent exploration of proposals to lift one of the most effective penalties that Obama imposed for Russia’s election interference — the seizure of two Russian compounds. Russia used those sprawling estates in Maryland and New York as retreats for its spies and diplomats but also — according to CIA and FBI officials — as platforms for espionage. The loss of those sites became a major grievance for Moscow.

Lavrov has raised the confiscation of those properties in nearly every meeting with his American counterparts, officials said, accusing the United States of having “stolen our dachas,” using the Russian word for country houses.

Putin may have had reason to expect that Russia would soon regain access to the compounds after Trump took office. In his recent guilty plea, Flynn admitted lying to the FBI about a conversation with the Russian ambassador in late December. During the call, which came as Obama was announcing sanctions on Russia, Flynn urged the ambassador not to overreact, suggesting the penalties
would be short-lived.

After a report in late May by The Post that the administration was considering returning the compounds, hard-liners in the administration mobilized to head off any formal offer.

Several weeks later, the FBI organized an elaborate briefing for Trump in the Oval Office, officials said. E.W. “Bill” Priestap, the assistant director of the counterintelligence division at the FBI, brought three-dimensional models of the properties, as well as maps showing their proximity to sensitive U.S. military or intelligence installations.
Appealing to Trump’s “America first” impulse, officials made the case that Russia had used the facilities to steal U.S. secrets. Trump seemed convinced, officials said.

“I told Rex we’re not giving the real estate back to the Russians,” Trump said at one point, referring to Tillerson, according to participants. Later, Trump marveled at the potential of the two sites and asked, “Should we sell this off and keep the money?”

But on July 6, Tillerson sent an informal communication to the Kremlin proposing the return of the two compounds, a gesture that he hoped would help the two sides pull out of a diplomatic tailspin. Under the proposed terms, Russia would regain access to the compounds but without diplomatic status that for years had rendered them outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law enforcement.

The FBI and some White House officials, including Hill, were livid when they learned that the plan had been communicated to Russia through a “non-paper” — an informal, nonbinding format. But “Tillerson never does anything without Trump’s approval,” a senior U.S. official said, making clear that the president knew in advance.

Administration officials provided conflicting accounts of what came next. Two officials indicated that there were additional communications with the Kremlin about the plan. One senior official said that Tillerson made a last-
minute change in the terms, proposing that the Maryland site be returned “status quo ante,” meaning with full diplomatic protections. It would again be off-limits to law enforcement agencies, including the FBI.

State Department officials disputed that account, however, saying that no such offer was ever contemplated and that the final proposal shared with the Kremlin was the non-paper sent on July 6 — one day before Trump met with Putin in Hamburg.

To view the online video, click on the URL or copy and paste it into your web browser:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_fELo5m8PM
Tillerson “never directed anyone to draft” a revised proposal to the Kremlin, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a written statement. “We considered possible options for restoring Russian access for recreational purposes in a way that would meet the security concerns of the U.S. government.” By the end of July, Congress had passed a new sanctions bill that “imposed specific conditions for the return of the dachas,” she said, “and the Russians have so far not been willing to meet them.”

Moscow made clear through Lavrov and others in mid-July that it regarded the overture, and the idea that any conditions would be placed on the return of the sites, as an insult. State Department officials interpreted that response as evidence that Russia’s real purpose was the resumption of espionage.

‘He was raging. He was raging mad.’

With no deal on the dachas, U.S.-Russia relations plunged into diplomatic free fall.

Even before Trump was sworn in, a group of senators including John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.) had begun drafting legislation to impose further sanctions on Russia.

In the ensuing months, McCain’s office began getting private warnings from a White House insider. “We were told that a big announcement was coming regarding Russia sanctions,” a senior congressional aide said. “We all kind of assumed the worst.”

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had blocked the sanctions bill from moving forward at the behest of Tillerson, who kept appealing for more time to negotiate with Moscow.
But after Comey's firing in early May, and months of damaging headlines about Trump and Russia, an alarmed Senate approved new sanctions on Russia in a 98-to-2 vote.

Trump at times seemed not to understand how his actions and behavior intensified congressional concern. After he emerged from a meeting in Hamburg with Putin, Trump said he and the Russian leader had agreed upon the outlines of a cooperative cybersecurity plan.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) described the proposed pact as “pretty close” to “the dumbest idea I've ever heard” and introduced additional provisions to the sanctions bill that would strip Trump of much of his power to undo them — a remarkable slap at presidential prerogative.

Then, in late July, new information surfaced about the extent of Trump's interactions with Putin in Hamburg that sent another wave of anxiety across Capitol Hill.

At the end of a lavish banquet for world leaders, Trump wandered away from his assigned seat for a private conversation with the Russian leader — without a single U.S. witness, only a Kremlin interpreter.

A Trump administration official described the reaction to the encounter as overblown, saying that Trump had merely left his seat to join the first lady, Melania Trump, who had been seated for the dinner next to Putin. Whatever the reason, little over a week later both chambers of Congress passed the sanctions measure with overwhelming margins that would withstand any Trump veto.

Trump's frustration had been building as the measure approached
a final vote. He saw the bill as validation of the case that Russia had interfered, as an encroachment on his executive authority and as a potentially fatal blow to his aspirations for friendship with Putin, according to his advisers.

In the final days before passage, Trump watched MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” program and stewed as hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski declared that the bill would be a slap in the face to the president.

“He was raging,” one adviser said. “He was raging mad.”

After final passage, Trump was “apoplectic,” the adviser recalled. It took four days for aides to persuade him to sign the bill, arguing that if he vetoed it and Congress overturned that veto, his standing would be permanently weakened.

“Hey, here are the votes,” aides told the president, according to a second Trump adviser. “If you veto it, they’ll override you and then you’re f---ed and you look like you’re weak.”

Trump signed but made his displeasure known. His signing statement asserted that the measure included “clearly unconstitutional provisions.” Trump had routinely made a show of bill signings, but in this case no media was allowed to attend.

The reaction from Russia was withering. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev taunted the president in a Facebook post that echoed Trump’s style, saying that the president had shown “complete impotence, in the most humiliating manner, transferring executive power to Congress.”

Putin, who had shown such restraint in late December 2016, reacted to the new sanctions with fury, ordering the United States
to close two diplomatic properties and slash 755 people from its staff — most of them Russian nationals working for the United States.

Rather than voice any support for the dozens of State Department and CIA employees being forced back to Washington, Trump expressed gratitude to Putin.

“I want to thank him because we’re trying to cut down on payroll,” Trump told reporters during an outing at his golf club in Bedminster, N.J. — remarks his aides would later claim were meant as a joke. “We’ll save a lot of money.”

‘Scream bloody murder’

Trump has never explained why he so frequently seems to side with Putin.

To critics, the answer is assumed to exist in the unproven allegations of coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign, or
the claim that Putin has some compromising information about the American president.

Aides attribute Trump’s affection for Putin to the president’s tendency to personalize matters of foreign policy and his unshakable belief that his bond with Putin is the key to fixing world problems.

“When will all the haters and fools out there realize that having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing,” Trump tweeted last month. “There always playing politics - bad for our country. I want to solve North Korea, Syria, Ukraine, terrorism, and Russia can greatly help!”

White House officials present Trump as the latest in a long line of presidents who began their tenures seeking better relations with Moscow, and they argue that the persistent questions about Russia and the election only advance the Kremlin’s aims and damage the president. “This makes me pissed because we’re letting these guys win,” a senior administration official said of the Russians. Referring to the disputed Florida tallies in the 2000 presidential election, the official said: “What if the Russians had created the hanging chads? How would that have been for George Bush?”

The allegations of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign, which the president has denied categorically, also contribute to his resistance to endorse the intelligence, another senior White House official said. Acknowledging Russian interference, Trump believes, would give ammunition to his critics.

Still others close to Trump explain his aversion to the intelligence findings in more psychological terms. The president, who burns with resentment over perceived disrespect from the Washington establishment, sees the Russia inquiry as a conspiracy to undermine his election accomplishment — “a witch hunt,” as he often calls it.
“If you say ‘Russian interference,’ to him it’s all about him,” said a senior Republican strategist who has discussed the matter with Trump’s confidants. “He judges everything as about him.”

Recent months have been marked by further erosion of the U.S.-Russia relationship and troubling developments for the White House, including the indictment of Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort and the guilty plea of Flynn.

Trump remains defiant about the special counsel’s probe, maintaining that he will be cleared of any wrongdoing and describing the matter as a “hoax” and a “hit job.”

Some of Trump’s most senior advisers support that view. One senior official said that Trump is right to portray the investigations and news reports as politically motivated attacks that have hurt the United States’ ability to work with Russia on real problems.

“We were looking to create some kind of bargain that would help us negotiate a very dangerous world,” said a senior White House official. “But if we do anything, Congress and the media will scream bloody murder.”

Putin expressed his own exasperation in early September, responding to a question about Trump with a quip that mocked the idea of a Trump-Putin bond while aiming a gender-related taunt at the American president. Trump “is not my bride,” Putin said, “and I am not his groom.”

The remark underscored the frustration and disenchantment that have taken hold on both sides amid the failure to achieve the breakthrough in U.S.-Russian relations that Trump and Putin both envisioned a year ago.
As a result, rather than shaping U.S. policy toward Russia, Trump at times appears to function as an outlier in his own administration, unable to pursue the relationship with Putin he envisioned but unwilling to embrace tougher policies favored by some in his Cabinet.

A Pentagon proposal that would pose a direct challenge to Moscow — a plan to deliver lethal arms to Ukrainian forces battling Russia-backed separatists — has languished in internal debates for months. The plan is backed by senior members of Trump’s Cabinet, including Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who voiced support for arming Ukrainian forces in meetings with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in August. Mattis “believes that you should help people who are fighting our potential adversaries,” said a senior U.S. official involved in the deliberations.
A decision to send arms has to be made by the president, and officials said Trump has been reluctant even to engage.

“Every conversation I’ve had with people on this subject has been logical,” the senior U.S. official said. “But there’s no logical conclusion to the process, and that tells me the bottleneck is in the White House.”

In July, the administration appointed former NATO ambassador Kurt Volker to serve as special envoy to Ukraine, putting him in charge of the delicate U.S. relationship with a former Soviet republic eager for closer ties with the West.

Putin has taken extraordinary measures to block that path, sending Russian commandos and arms into Ukraine to support pro-Russian separatists. And Putin is bitter about U.S. and European sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression. A decision by Trump to send arms would probably rupture U.S.-Russian relations beyond immediate repair.

Trump was forced to grapple with these complexities in September, when he met with Poroshenko at the United Nations. Volker met with Trump to prepare him for the encounter. Tillerson, McMaster and White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly, who had replaced Priebus, were also on hand.

Trump pressed Volker on why it was in the United States’ interests to support Ukraine and why U.S. taxpayers’ money should be spent doing so, Volker said in an interview. “Why is it worth it?” Volker said Trump asked. As Volker outlined the rationale for U.S. involvement, Trump seemed satisfied.

“I believe that what he wants is to settle the issue, he wants a better, more constructive U.S.-Russia relationship,” Volker said. “I think he
would like [the Ukraine conflict] to be solved . . . get this fixed so we can get to a better place.”

The conversation was about Ukraine but seemed to capture Trump’s frustration on so many Russia-related fronts — the election, the investigations, the complications that had undermined his relationship with Putin.

Volker said that the president repeated a single phrase at least five times, saying, “I want peace.”

Adam Entous, Ellen Nakashima and Julie Tate contributed to this report.

This story has been updated to note that The Post had been briefed on the dossier, but did not receive a copy until a couple of weeks before it was first published by BuzzFeed.