

Top Trump aide in frequent contact with Russia's ambassador

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump's national security adviser and Russia's ambassador to the U.S. have been in frequent contact in recent weeks, including on the day the Obama administration hit Moscow with sanctions in retaliation for election-related hacking, a senior official said Friday.

Trump spokesman Sean Spicer acknowledged contacts between Michael Flynn and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, but said a phone conversation occurred on Dec. 28, one day before the sanctions were levied. Spicer said the men did not discuss sanctions. He did not specifically deny additional contacts the following day.

It's not unusual for incoming administrations to have discussions with foreign governments before taking office.

But the repeated contacts just as President Barack Obama imposed sanctions would raise questions about whether Trump's team discussed — or even helped shape — Russia's response to the penalties.

Russian President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly did not retaliate against the U.S. for the move, a decision Trump quickly praised.

More broadly, Flynn's contact with the Russian ambassador suggests the incoming administration has already begun to lay the groundwork for its promised, new closer relationship with Moscow.

That effort appears to be moving ahead, even as many in Washington, including Republicans, have expressed outrage over intelligence officials' assessment that Putin launched a hacking operation aimed at meddling in the U.S. election to benefit Trump.

During a news conference Wednesday, Trump pointedly would not say whether he planned to repeal the sanctions ordered by Obama. He again highlighted his warmer



National Security Adviser-designate Michael Flynn arrives at Trump Tower on Jan. 3 in New York.

rapport with the Russian leader.

"If Putin likes Donald Trump, I consider that an asset, not a liability, because we have a horrible relationship with Russia," he said.

The sanctions targeted the GRU and FSB, leading Russian intelligence agencies that the U.S. said were involved in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and other groups. The U.S. also kicked out 35 Russian diplomats who it said were actually intelligence operatives.

Trump has been willing to insert himself into major foreign policy issues during the transition, at times contradicting the current administration and diplomatic protocol. He accepted a call from Taiwan's president, ignoring the long-standing "One China" policy that does not recognize the island's sovereignty. He also publicly urged the U.S.

to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, then slammed the Obama administration for abstaining and allowing the measure to pass.

Questions about Trump's friendly posture toward Russia have deepened since the election, as he has dismissed U.S. intelligence agencies' assertions about Russia's role in the hacking of Democratic groups. In briefing Trump on their findings, intelligence officials also presented the president-elect with unsubstantiated claims that Russia had amassed compromising personal and financial allegations about him, according to a separate U.S. official.

Trump acknowledged for the first time this week that he accepts that Russia was behind the hacking. But he questioned whether officials were leaking information about their meetings with him, warning that

would be a "tremendous blot" on their record.

Flynn's own ties with Russia have worried some Republicans who are more skeptical of the Kremlin than Trump appears to be. After leaving his position as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2014, Flynn made appearances on RT, a state-run Russian television network. In 2015, he was paid to attend an RT gala in Moscow, where he sat next to Putin.

As national security adviser, Flynn will work in the West Wing close to the Oval Office and have frequent access to Trump. Unlike Trump's nominees to lead the Pentagon, State Department and other national security agencies, Flynn's post does not require Senate confirmation.

Flynn's contacts with the Russian ambassador were first reported by *Washington Post* columnist David Igna-

Intel panel to examine possible campaign links with Russia

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate Intelligence Committee will investigate possible contacts between Russia and the people associated with U.S. political campaigns as part of a broader investigation into Moscow's meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

In a statement late Friday, Sens. Richard Burr, R-N.C., the committee's chairman, and Mark Warner, D-Va., the panel's top Democrat, said the panel "will follow the intelligence where it leads."

Burr and Warner said that as part of the investigation they will interview senior officials from the Obama administration and the incoming Trump administration. They said subpoenas would be issued "if necessary to compel testimony."

"We will conduct this inquiry expeditiously, and we will get it right," the senators said.

A declassified intelligence report released last week said Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a hidden campaign to influence the election to favor President-elect Donald Trump over Democrat Hillary Clinton, revelations that have roiled Washington.

Trump and his supporters have staunchly resisted the findings and Trump has leveled a series of broadsides at U.S. intelligence agencies, even though he will have to rely on their expertise to help him make major national security decisions once he takes over at the White House next week. Trump will be sworn in Jan. 20 in Washington, D.C.

At a news conference this week, Trump speculated that U.S. intelligence agencies might have leaked details about a classified briefing with him that included unsubstantiated allegations that Russia had collected compromising sexual and financial information about him.

He said any such information was not true: "It's all fake news. It's phony stuff. It didn't happen."

The bulk of the Senate Intelligence Committee's work will be done in secret, although the senators said they will hold open hearings when possible.

tius. The U.S. official who spoke to The Associated Press was not authorized to confirm the contacts publicly and insisted on anonymity.

Spicer, the Trump spokesman, initially said there was one phone call between Flynn and Kislyak on Dec. 28, as well as a Christmas greeting via text messages over the holidays. He said sanctions were not part of the discussions.

"The call centered around the logistics of setting up a call with the president of Russia and the president-elect after he was sworn in, and they exchanged logistical information on how to initiate and schedule that call," Spicer

told reporters Friday. "That was it, plain and simple."

A transition official later cited a second phone call that occurred earlier in December.

That official said Kislyak reached out to Flynn for the second phone call on Dec. 28, and by the time Flynn called him back, it may have been Dec. 29 in Moscow.

Trump spoke with Putin about a week after his victory. The transition team has not disclosed any other contact between the leaders. The transition official said the Russian ambassador also invited U.S. officials to a conference on Syria later this month that is being held in Kazakhstan.

BRIEFLY

In early GOP win on health care repeal, Congress OKs budget

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ascendant Republicans drove a budget through Congress on Friday that gives them an early but critical victory in their crusade to scrap President Barack Obama's health care overhaul.

The vote trains the spotlight on whether they and Donald Trump can deliver on repeated pledges to not just erase that statute but replace it.

Demonstrating the GOP's willingness to plunge into a defining but risky battle, the House used a near party-line 227-198 roll call to approve a measure that prevents Senate Democrats from derailing a future bill, thus far unwritten, annulling and reshaping Obama's landmark 2010 law. The budget, which won Senate approval early Thursday, does not need the president's signature.

"The 'Unaffordable' Care Act will soon be history!" Trump tweeted Friday. Trump takes the presidential oath next Friday.

The real work looms in coming months as the new administration and congressional Republicans

write legislation to erase much of the health care law and replace it with a GOP version. Republicans have internal divisions over what that would look like, though past GOP proposals have cut much of the existing law's federal spending and eased coverage requirements while relying more on tax benefits and letting states make decisions.

Friday's vote was preceded by debate that saw hyperbole on both sides and underscored how the two parties have alternate-universe views of Obama's overhaul. Democrats praised it for extending coverage to tens of millions of Americans, helping families afford policies and seniors buy prescriptions, while Republicans focused on the rising premiums and deductibles and limited access to doctors and insurers that have plagued many.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., said the health care law was "so arrogant and so contrary to our founding principles" and had not delivered on Obama's promises to lower costs and provide more choice.

"We have to step in before things get worse. This is nothing short of a rescue mission," Ryan said.

Personalized IRS letters nudge uninsured to get coverage

WASHINGTON (AP) — If you haven't signed up for health insurance, you may soon be getting a not-too-subtle nudge from the taxman.

The IRS is sending personalized letters to millions of taxpayers who might be uninsured, reminding them that they could be on the hook for hundreds of dollars in fines under the federal health care law if they don't sign up soon through HealthCare.gov. It's an unusual role for a revenue-collection agency.

Fines are one of the most unpopular parts of the 2010 health overhaul, and there's a high likelihood they'll get repealed by Republicans, even if other parts of "Obamacare" survive. The administration is counting on IRS reminders to help sign up as many people as possible before open enrollment ends Jan. 31. That's soon after officials hand off President Barack Obama's signature program to a Trump administration committed to "repeal and replace."

Letters bearing the IRS logo

will be sent to an estimated 7.5 million people who either claimed an exemption from the law's requirement that most Americans carry health insurance, or who paid a penalty for being uninsured during the 2015 tax year.

The coverage requirement was included in the law as a way to get healthy people into the insurance pool, helping to keep premiums in check. The penalty for this year could be \$2,085 or more, depending on family size and income, says one draft version of the IRS letter. Another draft takes a somewhat different approach, leaving a blank space for the IRS to provide an individualized estimate of what the particular uninsured taxpayer might owe.

Republicans say the whole thing is a waste of money. The campaign will cost about \$4 million, say congressional aides.

"People receiving these letters have already made up their minds about Obamacare when they applied for an exemption or paid a penalty," said House Ways and Means Chairman Kevin Brady, R-Texas. "They don't want stock letters. They want better health care choices and lower costs."

Oil pipeline safety rule scaled back after cost objections

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — President Barack Obama's administration scaled back new safety measures for the sprawling network of fuel pipelines that crisscross the United States on Friday, following oil industry complaints that proposed changes would cost companies billions of dollars.

The long-delayed regulations cover almost 200,000 miles of pipelines that transport oil, gasoline and other hazardous liquids. They will be subject to review by Congress and the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump, who was highly critical on the campaign trail of regulations that hinder energy development.

If the changes stand, pipeline companies will be required to conduct more rigorous inspections of lines in rural areas and install leak detection systems that are meant to speed up emergency response times when accidents occur. An earlier proposal for companies to immediately repair problems was dropped.

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