

Trump on Russian meddling: 'Nobody really knows for sure'

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Hours before a crucial meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, President Donald Trump stopped short Thursday of condemning Moscow for meddling in the U.S. presidential election — and refused to say if he would raise the issue when the leaders go behind closed doors.

Yet in a speech to a friendly crowd of thousands who chanted his name in downtown Warsaw, Trump sought to demonstrate that he wasn't overlooking Russian behavior that has sparked global concern, especially from Poland and other eastern and central European nations.

"We urge Russia to cease its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere, and its support for hostile regimes, including Syria and Iran, and to join the community of responsible nations in our fight against common enemies and in defense of civilization itself," he said from Krasinski Square.

Trump's critique did not appear to extend to Russian actions during last year's presidential campaign. Multiple U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia meddled in the election to benefit Trump, who has refused to embrace the finding.

During a news conference before his speech praising Poland for overcoming adversity, Trump again questioned the reliability of U.S. intelligence on the election issue and argued that Russia wasn't the only country that might be guilty of interfering.

"Nobody really knows for sure," Trump said.

Poland's conservative government had promised the U.S. president enthusiastic crowds in its invitation to Trump, Polish media had reported, and it clearly delivered.

Opening his second overseas trip since taking office in January, Trump also warned North Korea that he's considering "some pretty severe things" in response to the isolated nation's unprecedented launch this week of a missile capable of reaching the U.S. He offered no details, but called on all nations to confront North Korea's "very, very bad behavior."

Trump also stated unequivocally that the U.S. stands "firmly behind Article 5," the NATO provision requiring members to defend each other if they come under attack. He had disappointed U.S. allies by declining to affirm that commitment during his first trip to Europe in May.



President Donald Trump arrives to deliver a speech at Krasinski Square at the Royal Castle, Thursday in Warsaw.

As U.S. investigations into Russia's interference continue, Trump is under intense scrutiny over how he handles his first face-to-face meeting Friday with Putin, a former Russian intelligence agent. They will meet in Hamburg, Germany, on the sidelines of a summit of the world's rich and developing nations.

A group of senior Democratic U.S. senators served notice Thursday that Trump would be in "severe dereliction" of his presidential duty if he fails to confront Putin over the issue, telling Trump in a letter that he must make clear that Russia's interference in U.S. democracy will not be tolerated.

"The upcoming elections cannot be a playground for President Putin," said Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York; Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Senate's No. 2 Democrat; and the top Democrats on the Intelligence, Armed Services, and Foreign Relations committees.

Unwilling to cast doubt on the legitimacy of his election victory, Trump has avoided firmly blaming Russia for the campaign hacking. He skirted the blame game again Thursday, arguing at turns that it could have been, probably was and indeed was Russia.

He insisted that other countries could have been involved, too.

Trump demurred when asked whether he would raise the election issue with Putin. He sought instead to turn the question around on his predecessor,

blaming then-President Barack Obama for essentially sanctioning Moscow's interference.

Though the Obama administration warned Russia publicly and privately before the Nov. 8 election to quit interfering, questions have since been raised about whether Obama acted aggressively enough to stop the threat.

"They say he choked — well, I don't think he choked," Trump said at a news conference with Polish President Andrzej Duda. "I think he thought Hillary Clinton was going to win the election, and he said, 'Let's not do anything about it.'"

Using information collected by the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency, the U.S. national intelligence director last year concluded that Moscow was behind the hack of Democratic Party email systems and attempted to influence the 2016 election to benefit Trump. The Obama administration said the effort was directed from the "highest levels" of Russia's government — a reference to Putin.

"Mistakes have been made" by U.S. intelligence, said Trump, offering a reminder that America's spy agencies had once been confident that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. He said that created "one big mess" in the form of the Iraq war. Though Trump has made similar statements before, it was an extraordinary public expression of doubt about U.S. intelligence capabilities by a president while on foreign soil.

BRIEFLY

Of 'severe things,' U.S. military strike on NKorea is unlikely

WASHINGTON (AP) — A pre-emptive military strike may be among the "pretty severe things" President Donald Trump says he is considering for North Korea, but it's a step so fraught with risk that it ranks as among the unlikeliest options.

Even a so-called surgical strike aimed at the North's partially hidden nuclear and missile force is unlikely to destroy the arsenal or stop its leader, Kim Jong Un, from swiftly retaliating with long-range artillery that could kill stunning numbers in South Korea within minutes.

An all-out conflict could then ensue. And while Trump's Pentagon chief, Jim Mattis, says the U.S. would prevail, he believes it would be "a catastrophic war."

Trump said the time has arrived to confront North Korea.

"I don't like to talk about what I have planned, but I have some pretty severe things that we're thinking about," the president said. "That doesn't mean we're going to do them."

McConnell says limited bill needed if GOP health bill dies

GLASGOW, Ky. (AP) — A bill focused on buttressing the nation's insurance marketplaces will be needed if the full-fledged Republican effort to repeal much of President Barack Obama's health care law fails, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday.

It was one of his most explicit acknowledgments that his party's top-priority drive to erase much of Obama's landmark 2010 statutes might fall short.

The remarks by McConnell, R-Ky., meant that to show progress on health care, Republicans controlling the White House and Congress might have to negotiate with Democrats. While the current GOP health care bill — which McConnell is hoping to push through — has procedural protections against a Democratic filibuster, a narrower measure wouldn't.

The existing bill would fail if just three of the 52 Republicans vote no, since all Democrats oppose it. McConnell was forced to cancel a planned vote on the measure last week after far more Republicans than that objected, and he's been spending the Independence Day recess studying possible changes that might win over GOP dissidents.

"If my side is unable to agree on an adequate replacement, then some kind of action with regard to the private health insurance market must occur," McConnell said. "No action is not an alternative. We've got the insurance markets imploding all over the country, including in this state."

U.S. judge in Hawaii leaves Trump's travel ban rules in place

HONOLULU (AP) — A federal judge in Hawaii on Thursday left Trump administration rules in place for a travel ban on citizens from six majority-Muslim countries.

U.S. District Court Judge Derrick Watson denied an emergency motion filed by Hawaii asking him to clarify what the U.S. Supreme Court meant by a "bona fide" relationship in its ruling last month.

Watson says the relationship question would be better posed to the Supreme Court, not him.

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FRIDAY AFTERNOON & EVENING

Table with columns for time slots (12 PM, 1 PM, 2 PM, 3 PM, 4 PM, 5 PM, 6 PM, 7 PM, 8 PM, 9 PM, 10 PM, 11 PM, 11:30) and rows for various TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, CABLE, PREMIUM) listing programs and their descriptions.

FRIDAY LATE NIGHT & SATURDAY MORNING

Table with columns for time slots (12 AM, 1 AM, 2 AM, 3 AM, 4 AM, 5 AM, 6 AM, 7 AM, 8 AM, 9 AM, 10 AM, 11 AM, 11:30) and rows for various TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS) listing programs and their descriptions.