

POLITICS

# Trump Administration Used Potential Meeting to Pressure Ukraine on Biden, Texts Indicate

President also called on China to investigate former vice president and his son

*By Rebecca Ballhaus, Siobhan Hughes and Dustin Volz*

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WASHINGTON—The Trump administration sought to use a potential meeting between the president and his Ukrainian counterpart as leverage to press Kyiv to investigate Joe Biden, newly released text messages indicated, as President Trump called on China to also investigate his political rival.

The president's efforts to persuade Ukraine in a July phone call to investigate Mr. Biden have already set off an impeachment inquiry by House Democrats, who are looking at whether the president abused the power of his office for political gain.

Text messages released by House committees late Thursday revealed that Trump administration officials sought to use a White House meeting between Mr. Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart as leverage to press the Ukrainian government to pursue an investigation into Mr. Biden and other matters. The messages indicate that U.S. officials coordinated with aides to the Ukrainian president and Rudy Giuliani, Mr. Trump's private lawyer, on a draft statement in which Kyiv would announce an investigation into Mr. Biden and the 2016 U.S. election—at the same time as announcing a visit by the Ukrainian president to the White House.

The messages also reveal concerns by a top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine that Mr. Trump was seeking to use a hold on nearly \$400 million in U.S. aid to Ukraine—which the president imposed a week before his July call with his Ukrainian counterpart—for political purposes.

The messages were cited by Democrats as powerful new evidence that Mr. Trump and his administration were willing to use the power of his office to persuade a foreign country to undertake a probe that would be beneficial to his re-election campaign.

“American presidents should never press foreign powers to target their domestic political

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rivals,” the Democratic chairmen of three House committees wrote on Thursday.

Separately, Mr. Trump’s call for China to investigate Mr. Biden and his son marked the first time he invoked Beijing—with which the U.S. is involved in tense trade negotiations—in his quest for a probe into his potential 2020 opponent. “China should start an investigation into the Bidens, because what happened in China is just about as bad as what happened with—with Ukraine,” he told reporters on the South Lawn of the White House.

Asked if he had sought Chinese President Xi Jinping’s help, Mr. Trump said: “I haven’t, but it’s certainly something we can start thinking about.”

In a tweet Friday morning, Mr. Trump said: “As President I have an obligation to end CORRUPTION, even if that means requesting the help of a foreign country or countries....This has NOTHING to do with politics or a political campaign against the Bidens. This does have to do with their corruption!”

On the morning of July 25—shortly before Mr. Trump in a phone call pressed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Mr. Biden and his son and examine whether Ukraine had interfered in the 2016 U.S. election—a Trump administration official texted a top aide to Mr. Zelensky dangling the possibility of a visit to Washington for the Ukrainian president.

“Heard from the White House—assuming President Z convinces Trump he will investigate/”get to the bottom of what happened” in 2016, we will nail down date for visit to Washington,” wrote Kurt Volker, then the U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations. Mr. Volker testified before House lawmakers on Thursday and turned over the text messages to them.

The Zelensky aide, Andriy Yermak, wrote to Mr. Volker after the phone call to assure him that it “went well” and that Mr. Trump had asked Mr. Zelensky to choose dates for a visit. In the phone call, Mr. Zelensky had assured the president that Ukraine was “ready to open a new page on cooperation” after Mr. Trump requested that he investigate Ukraine’s role in the 2016 U.S. election.

A week earlier, on July 19, Mr. Volker texted Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, as the two discussed preparations for the coming call and said: “Most imp’t is for

Zelensky to say he will help investigation—and address any specific personnel issues.”

Days after Mr. Yermak met with Mr. Giuliani in Madrid in August, Mr. Yermak began discussing with U.S. officials a draft statement that Ukraine had written that would announce a coming visit by Mr. Zelensky to Washington and describe a “vision for the reboot of US-UKRAINE relationship,” which would include investigating the company where Mr. Biden’s son worked and election interference, according to a text message Mr. Yermak sent to Mr. Volker on Aug. 10.

As they were discussing the draft statement Ukrainian officials had crafted, Mr. Sondland told Mr. Volker: “I think potus really wants the deliverable.”

On Aug. 9, Messrs. Volker and Sondland texted Mr. Giuliani requesting a phone call to “make sure we get this done right.”

After drafting the statement, Ukrainian officials expressed concerns about announcing an investigation involving Burisma Group, the company where Hunter Biden once sat on the board, including that mentioning a specific company could prejudice any investigation, according to a person familiar with the matter. Mr. Volker agreed with those concerns and advised them not to go forward with the statement, the person said.

In September, the top U.S. diplomat to Ukraine suggested there was a link between the president’s interest in a Biden investigation and his decision in July to put a hold on nearly \$400 million in U.S. aid to Ukraine.

On Sept. 1, Bill Taylor, the chargé d’affaires in Ukraine, texted Mr. Sondland: “Are we now saying that security assistance and WH meeting are conditioned on investigations?” Mr. Sondland responded: “Call me.”

Over a week later, Mr. Taylor wrote in a text message to Messrs. Volker and Sondland: “I think it’s crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign.”

Mr. Sondland responded that he believed Mr. Taylor was “incorrect about President Trump’s intentions.” He added: “The President has been crystal clear no quid pro quo’s of any kind” and urged that the two “stop the back and forth by text.”

Mr. Taylor expressed discomfort to his colleagues about the efforts to recruit Ukraine to serve Mr. Trump politically throughout the text logs released by the House committees, and repeatedly linked those efforts to the withheld security aid. “The nightmare is they give the interview and don’t get security assistance,” Mr. Taylor texted on Sept. 8. “The Russians love it. (And I quit.)”

Ukrainians also expressed alarm about the president’s decision to hold up U.S. aid, which was released last month. Mr. Yermak texted Mr. Volker the link to a Politico article about the move and

wrote: “Need to talk with you.”

Republicans on Thursday argued that the released text messages were “cherry-picked.” GOP lawmakers want Mr. Volker’s full testimony released.

By involving China in his campaign against Mr. Biden, Mr. Trump is likely to escalate concerns of Democratic lawmakers. His comment comes as Washington and Beijing are engaged in a trade war that is weighing on the global economy.

The two countries, which have imposed tariffs on each others’ exports, have made little progress on a trade deal since hitting an impasse in early May. High-level negotiations are expected to resume in Washington late next week. Mr. Trump has portrayed China as eager to reach a trade pact to revive the country’s growth.

“I have a lot of options on China,” Mr. Trump said Thursday regarding trade. “If they do not do what we want, we have tremendous power.”

Mr. Trump’s invocation of China centers on Hunter Biden’s decision in 2013 to join an investment advisory firm that joined with Chinese entities, shortly after traveling with his father to China while he was vice president. No evidence of any impropriety has emerged.

China’s criminal-justice system long has been a matter of concern to U.S. officials. A 2019 State Department report on human rights warned of arbitrary arrests, detentions and killings, and intimidation of witnesses. The State Department has advised caution for U.S. travelers to China, citing risks of arbitrary law enforcement and saying the Chinese government could deny access to U.S. consular services if arrested or detained.

Mr. Biden, in his most forceful comments to date on the subject, said in a speech in Reno, Nev., on Wednesday that as vice president, he carried out the official policy of the U.S. government to root out corruption in Ukraine in tandem with European allies, the International Monetary Fund and “courageous reformers” in Ukraine. The prosecutor was the target of widespread criticism from the U.S. and other countries.

“We weren’t pressing Ukraine to get rid of a tough prosecutor, we were pursuing Ukraine to replace a weak prosecutor who wouldn’t do his job,” Mr. Biden said.

Mr. Volker in his deposition defended Mr. Biden’s work in Ukraine and pointed out that the prosecutor was corrupt and worked to shield favored people from prosecution, rather than go after wrongdoers, according to the person familiar with his testimony.

—Ken Thomas, Courtney McBride, Lindsay Wise and Jesse Naranjo contributed to this article.

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