

Biden Criticizes Trump Over Intelligence on Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops

The White House denied that President Trump was briefed on the classified assessment, even though his staff has been discussing the matter since March.



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WASHINGTON — Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. assailed President Trump on Saturday for failing to punish Russia for offering bounties to the Taliban to kill American troops in Afghanistan, while the White House denied that Mr. Trump had been briefed on the months-old classified intelligence assessment about Russia’s activities.

Citing officials briefed on the matter, The New York Times reported on Friday that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly paid Taliban-linked militants to target coalition troops in Afghanistan, including Americans and that Mr. Trump had been briefed about it. The article also reported that the White House’s National Security Council discussed the problem at an interagency meeting in late March, but no response had yet been authorized.

Mr. Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, portrayed that as shameful.

“Not only has he failed to sanction or impose any kind of consequences on Russia for this egregious violation of international law, Donald Trump has continued his embarrassing campaign of deference and debasing himself before Vladimir Putin,” Mr. Biden said in a virtual town hall event held by a voter group, Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote.

“His entire presidency has been a gift to Putin, but this is beyond the pale,” Mr. Biden added. “It’s a betrayal of the most sacred duty we bear as a nation, to protect and equip our troops when we send them into harm’s way.”

The officials briefed on the matter said the intelligence assessment was based at least in part on interrogations of captured Afghan militants and criminals. The officials said the assessment had been treated as a closely held secret but that the administration expanded briefings about it over the past week — including sharing information about it with the British government, whose forces are among those said to have been targeted.

But as criticism of the administration’s inaction swelled on Friday and Saturday, the White House claimed that Mr. Trump had never been told about the intelligence assessment.

“While the White House does not routinely comment on alleged intelligence or internal deliberations, the C.I.A. director, national security adviser and the chief of staff can all confirm that neither the president nor the vice president were briefed on the alleged Russian bounty intelligence,” the White House press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, said in a statement Saturday afternoon, about 25 hours after the article was posted on The Times’s website.

About six hours later on Saturday night, the director of national intelligence, John Ratcliffe, issued a statement echoing the White House’s assertion that Mr. Trump had not been briefed on the intelligence finding.

But one American official had told The Times that the intelligence finding that the Russians had offered and paid bounties to Afghan militants and criminals had been briefed at the highest levels of the White House.

Another said it was included in the President’s Daily Brief, a written document which draws from spywork to make analytic predictions about longstanding adversaries, unfolding plots and emerging crises around the world. The briefing document is given to the president to read and they serve as the basis for oral briefings to him several times a week.

Asked on Saturday evening how the president could not have known about the report if it had been in his daily brief, a National Security Council spokesman did not immediately respond.

Ms. McEnany notably did not question the substance of the intelligence assessment, saying only that her statement “did not speak to the merit of the alleged intelligence.” She also did not challenge the Times’s reporting that the National Security Council had convened an interagency meeting about what to do about the report in late March.

Ms. McEnany did not explain why such an important report would have been withheld from Mr. Trump. Nor did she indicate whether Mr. Trump was upset at his subordinates for purportedly withholding the information from him.

American officials reached on Saturday said it strained credulity to think that White House national-security officials would be discussing such an important matter for months and even brief British officials about it and never provide the information to Mr. Trump.

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The Times article did not say whether Vice President Mike Pence had been briefed.

Ms. McEnany also said in her statement that “the United States receives thousands of intelligence reports a day and they are subject to strict scrutiny.” It was not clear why she portrayed the report as if it were a tip merely received by the government from an outside source, when it was instead an intelligence assessment developed by the American government itself, based on analyzing intelligence.

Mr. Trump is particularly difficult to brief on critical national security matters, according to a recent examination by The Times that drew on interviews with 10 current and former intelligence officials familiar with his intelligence briefings.

The president veers off on tangents and getting him back on topic is difficult, they said. He has a short attention span and is said to rarely, if ever, read intelligence reports, including the written President’s Daily Brief document prepared for him.

Mr. Trump is said to have chosen to sit for intelligence briefings two or three times a week, rather than every day. Those briefings are based on the daily brief documents.

Press officers with the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the State Department and the C.I.A. declined to comment on Friday before the article was posted online. The security council and Pentagon spokesmen also declined to comment when asked again after the article was published.

Both Russia and the Taliban have denied the American intelligence assessment. On Saturday, Russia’s embassy in Washington posted a screenshot of the Times report to Twitter with “FAKE” superimposed over it in big red letters. The embassy also accused American intelligence officials without evidence of involvement in drug trafficking in Afghanistan, suggesting they were floating erroneous information to distract from that.

In a statement, a Taliban spokesman dismissed the intelligence assessment as rumors, meant to interfere in the peace process with the United States to end the long-running war there.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

“We reassure our nation and the entire world that the Islamic Emirate is not a tool of anyone nor is it employed for foreign agendas,” the spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said.

The pushback followed a fierce expression of outrage at the Trump administration’s inaction. Much of it, like the statement from Mr. Biden, came from Democrats. But a few Republicans took public notice as well.

Senator Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican who is an outspoken supporter of Mr. Trump but sometimes tries to push him to more hawkish positions — such as opposing his plan to pull out of Syria — said on Twitter that he wanted the administration to take the intelligence assessment seriously and brief Congress on the matter.

“I expect the Trump Administration to take such allegations seriously and inform Congress immediately as to the reliability of these news reports,” Mr. Graham wrote.

The United States concluded months ago that the Russian intelligence unit, which has been linked to assassination attempts and other covert operations in Europe intended to destabilize the West or take revenge on turncoats, had covertly offered rewards for successful attacks last year.

In response to the intelligence assessment, senior administration aides developed an array of potential options — starting with making a diplomatic complaint to Moscow and a demand that it stop, along with an escalating series of sanctions and other more aggressive possible responses, according to officials familiar with internal deliberations.

But the White House has yet to decide on taking any step, the officials said in recent days.

Islamist militants, or armed criminal elements closely associated with them, are believed to have collected some bounty money, the officials said. Twenty Americans were killed in combat in Afghanistan in 2019, but it was not clear which killings were under suspicion.

The officials familiar with the intelligence did not explain the White House’s delay in deciding how to respond to the intelligence about Russia.

Afghanistan has been the site of proxy battles between Washington and Moscow before. In the 1980s, while the Soviet Union was mired in its own bloody war in the country, it was the United States that covertly helped arm the mujahedeen to fight against the Red Army in one of the last major confrontations of the Cold War.

After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Russia was largely supportive of the American effort to destroy Al Qaeda and topple the Taliban government. Russia declared the Taliban a terrorist organization in 2003, but recently their relationship has been warming, with Taliban leaders traveling to Moscow for peace talks.

Fatima Faizi contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.