

# RUSSIAN BOUNTIES ON U.S. TROOPS: WHY HASN'T THE ADMINISTRATION RESPONDED?

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## HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

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JULY 9, 2020  
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## **RUSSIAN BOUNTIES ON U.S. TROOPS: WHY HASN'T THE ADMINISTRATION RESPONDED?**

**Thursday, July 9, 2020**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:03 p.m., via WebEx, Hon. Joaquin Castro [acting chairman of the committee], presiding. Mr. CASTRO [presiding]. The Committee on Foreign Affairs will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

Please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum.

And I will now recognize myself for opening remarks.

We meet today to discuss reporting that Russia put bounties on the heads of American and allied troops, Russian cash pouring into the Taliban's coffers in exchange for American lives. While we are going to steer clear of discussing any classified information in this hearing, I think I am on safe ground to say that these allegations and claims were never denied by the White House. Russia's actions, if true, are unacceptable. The American people are demanding answers and they are demanding accountability.

This hearing is also a reminder that America's longest war, now approaching nearly two decades of continued conflict, still wages on in Afghanistan. Bringing the 9/11 terrorists to justice was an imperative, but few would argue today that U.S. national security interests are being served by this endless war.

Just this past week, a young soldier from my hometown of San Antonio died in a vehicle rollover accident, Vincent Sebastian Ibarria. He was 21 years old and dreamed of becoming a nurse after serving in the Army. I express my condolences to his family and to the more than 2,000 American families who lost a loved one during this conflict. We need to bring this endless war to a close.

Today, this committee looks to answer an important foreign policy question: why has Russia faced no consequences, not even a

public rebuke, from the Trump administration? We invited Secretary Pompeo to testify today. He refused, which is what we have come to expect from this Secretary of State. While he makes plenty of time for interviews on Fox News and seems to relish bullying fact-based journalists from the State Department press room, he rarely, if ever, summons the courage to answer questions from his former colleagues in the House of Representatives, as every other Secretary of State before him has done.

Russia is not our friend. Vladimir Putin is not a partner of the United States. He is a dictator who just last week extended his tenure to 2036. He has robbed his people of their rights. He has trampled on the sovereignty of his neighbors. He has used the resources of the Russian government to undermine democracy, splinter NATO and the EU, and bolster other despots like Assad. His tools are disinformation, violent suppression, and assassination. All of that is contemptible enough, but putting a price on American heads is a serious escalation.

Exactly how the intelligence on this matter was presented to the President is still unclear. The Trump administration's excuses keep changing. Perhaps it was within his briefing, but that does not necessarily mean the briefers briefed him on it, because it is widely known that President Trump does not read the Presidential Daily Briefing. Or maybe they did not brief him because the intelligence was, quote-unquote, "disputed," even though only intelligence that is of major significance makes it into the Presidential Daily Briefing. Per usual with President Trump, we are a long, long way from the buck stops here.

Even if the administration's explanations are true, it paints a picture of incompetence at the highest levels of our national security apparatus. But what troubles me the most from a foreign policy perspective is what this White House did and did not do once it received this information. Was there a public condemnation of Russia and Vladimir Putin from the Trump administration? Did the State and Treasury Departments slap sanctions on Russian officials involved in the plot? Did the Taliban, with whom we have been at war for nearly two decades, pay a price? What are the State and Defense Departments doing to protect our service members and how are they working with our NATO allies who are contributing to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan with us to address this threat? None of that. As a matter of fact, this President kept doing what he has been doing since even before he was elected, cozying up to Vladimir Putin.

Since the United States reportedly obtained this intelligence, President Trump has released a joint statement with Vladimir Putin, directed the purchase of faulty Russian ventilators, and withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, a critical part of monitoring Russian military activity. He also ordered the reduction of America's troop presence in Germany, an act that was met with bipartisan rebuke and criticism from our allies, but with praise from the Russians. He even wanted to expand the G-7 to include Russia again, which was expelled from the group in 2014 following Putin's illegal annexation of Crimea. It is almost as if President Trump is on a mission to make Russia great again.

This issue is also not without precedent. In 2011, the Obama Administration discovered that Pakistani intelligence officers urged Taliban-affiliated militants to attack the U.S. embassy and a NATO headquarters in Kabul. How did the Obama Administration respond? Secretary Clinton and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Mike Mullen, confronted Pakistani officials and publicly shamed them for these actions, even though we were relying on Pakistan for certain access into Afghanistan. Admiral Mullen called the Haqqani Network a “veritable arm of Pakistani’s intelligence agency.” White House officials stood up for Americans and the troops who were in harm’s way.

The way this administration tries to distort reality and gaslight the American people is, frankly, a page right out of Vladimir Putin’s playbook. But the facts are clear. The Trump administration failed in its most sacred duty, to keep Americans safe.

I hope that our witnesses can help us navigate all of this today and provide some ideas and insight about what our policy should look like under these circumstances. But, before I turn to the witnesses, I want to recognize Ranking Member Mike McCaul of Texas for his opening remarks.

Mr. McCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope everybody can hear me okay. Thank you for calling this important hearing.

As I have said time and time again—and I agree with the chairman that Vladimir Putin is not our friend, not a friend to the United States or our allies. In the past few years, we have witnessed his regime invade and occupy parts of Ukraine and Georgia, unleash devastating cyber attacks against our allies, use a banned nerve agent to try to kill a former Russian spy in the UK, prop up corrupt regimes in Syria and Venezuela. They meddled in our elections. They undermine American interests around the world. He has proven he just cannot be trusted and he certainly is not our friend.

And now, we are faced with widely reported allegations that a Russian military intelligence unit, the GRU, has paid Taliban-linked militants to kill Americans and coalition forces in Afghanistan. While it is not news that Moscow has provided the Taliban with weapons and other support—and they have been there since 1979—now Russia paying bounties for the murder of American service members would be an unacceptable escalation. If true, the administration, in my judgment, must take swift and serious action to hold the Putin regime accountable, and that should include not inviting Russia to rejoin the G-7.

We have passed, Mr. Chairman, as you know, sanctions that the administration can enact today on these Russian entities. Ultimately, there is nothing more important than protecting our American troops serving overseas. I think we can all agree we must take any threat to their safety seriously, especially from someone with a track record like Putin.

I hope we use our time today to discuss how to more effectively deal with the dangerous autocrat in the Kremlin rather than descending into a partisan blame game. The only person who benefits from American infighting over this issue is Vladimir Putin. He loves chaos. And after last week’s sham nationwide vote in Russia that allows Putin to remain in power through 2036, essentially,

making him the emperor of Russia, it is even more critical for Americans to work together with our allies, especially through NATO, to counter Putin's nefarious activities around the world.

While the topic of this hearing will certainly center around Russia and Vladimir Putin, the backdrop is Afghanistan. I urge my colleagues to continue supporting our partners in Afghanistan to help bring peace and stability to their country.

My friend, Ambassador Rahmani, has devoted herself to helping secure that future for Afghanistan, and I want to take this opportunity to thank her for her unwavering dedication to that mission. And I think it is very commendable that Afghanistan appoint a female Ambassador to the United States, and I hope that she will be made a part of the negotiating team when they meet with the Taliban.

I would also like to note that I appreciate the White House quickly providing briefings on today's topic on both sides of the aisle, including myself, the chairman, and other members of the committee. And further, I know my colleagues want to get the full story. So, I would encourage them to read all the classified materials provided on this important matter to get the entire picture.

And so, finally, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and our witnesses for their testimony. And with that, I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

I am now going to introduce the witnesses who will testify to us.

Our first witness is Mr. Michael Morell, former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He is one of our Nation's leading national security professionals and has been at the center of the Nation's fight against terrorism. He has worked to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and efforts to counter U.S. adversaries like Russia and China. He also was previously in charge of organizing the President's Daily Briefing under President George W. Bush.

Our next witness is Dr. Celeste Wallander, former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia/Central Asia on the National Security Council. She is a leading expert on Russian foreign policy, security, defense, and military affairs, and is the current president and CEO of the U.S. Russia Foundation. Previously, Dr. Wallander also served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia at the Department of Defense, and was a professor at American University.

After her will be our witness General John Nicholson, a retired U.S. Army general and the former commander of the Afghan war effort, having led the 41-nation, NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the United States Forces Afghanistan for more than two and a half years. His total U.S. Army career spanned over 36 years, with more than 12 of those years being spent at various NATO commands. He also serves as an adjunct faculty member on leadership with Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and is a member of Harvard's Belfer Center Elbe Group, which sustains Track 2 dialog between retired American and Russian senior officials for military and intelligence background.

And last, but not least, we have Mr. Ian Brzezinski, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO and na-



tional security affairs staffer in the Senate. Mr. Brzezinski is a leading expert on Europe and NATO with more than three decades of experience and government service. He is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on Strategy and Security and the Council's Future Europe Initiative.

Thank you all for being here. I will now recognize each witness for 5 minutes. And without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Mr. Morell.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MORELL, FORMER ACTING DIRECTOR AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**

Mr. MORELL. Chairman Castro, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of this distinguished committee, good afternoon. It is an honor for me to be here with you today, and it is also an honor for me to testify alongside my distinguished panelists.

Chairman, for the sake of time, I am going to summarize the written testimony that I submitted to the committee. What I want to focus on is what I know, which is how the collection, dissemination, and analytic processes of the intelligence community work; how the PDB process works; how the policy process on something like this would have worked at senior levels of the Bush and the Obama Administrations in which I spent much time in the Situation Room. So, with that in mind, I want to make eight points.

One, there is a misperception about who receives raw intelligence. Many assume that it only goes to intelligence community analysts who decide what to share, and in what context, with intelligence consumers. That perception is not accurate. Raw intelligence gets disseminated widely—to intelligence analysts, yes, but also to warfighters in the field and at the Pentagon, the policymakers at the State Department and the Defense Department, as well as to senior White House officials via the White House Situation Room. The important point here is that many people would have already seen the raw intelligence as the analysts were just beginning their work on it.

Two, a key question with regard to the raw intelligence is whether it was clear to a reader what might be happening—that is, what the Russians might be doing with these bounties—or if it was possible to only see that by connecting a number of dots. I do not know what the case was here. But, even if it was only vaguely clear from the raw intelligence that the Russians might be paying bounties for the killing of American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the U.S. Government, including the President, before the analysts concluded their work.

Three, the lead IC agencies in assessing the information would have been the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Counterterrorism Center, for reasons that I outlined in my written testimony. The analysts would assess the information and they would come to two separate judgments. One, whether or not they believed Moscow was offering the bounties, and if they believed that, No. 2, their level of confidence in that judgment—low, medium, or high.

Four, if the analysts believed at any level of confidence that the Russians were providing the bounties, that judgment would be presented in the PDB. If the President does not read the PDB—and not all Presidents have—then it would have been briefed to him, if not by the President's briefer, then by the Director of National Intelligence or the Director of CIA, or even those senior administration officials who were aware of it, such as the National Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, or the Vice President.

Five, contrary to what has been said by some, a dissent within the intelligence community on either the judgment itself or on the confidence level would not keep the piece out of the PDB. Rather, the dissent would be noted in the PDB piece.

Six, once the piece was in the PDB, the IC leadership on something of this significance would brief Congress as early as the same day as the piece ran in the PDB and certainly no later than the next day.

Seven, if the intelligence community assessed that the Russians were providing the bounties at any level of confidence, that would kick off a policy process inside the NSC staff on how the U.S. should respond. The analysts' level of confidence would make a difference to that process. A medium to high level of confidence would lead to a policy decision, I believe, on how to respond, while a low level of confidence would result in a decision that more intelligence was necessary before a policy decision could be made. I will leave it to General Nicholson to explain how the warfighters in Afghanistan would have reacted to the information and to the analysis at any level of confidence.

Eight, and finally, a medium-to-high-level confidence judgment that the Russians were offering the bounties would in every administration that I worked in—and I worked in six—have resulted in some sort of policy action designed to deter the Russians going forward. The safety of our troops would have required it.

Mr. Chairman, let me stop there, and I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Morell follows:]

Michael Morell  
 Private Citizen  
 Former Acting and Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency  
 Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives  
 Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?  
 July 9, 2020

#### Testimony

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, Members of the Committee,

It is an honor to be invited to appear before this distinguished committee.

A number of senior national security officials over multiple administrations, both Republican and Democrat, including at least four presidents, taught me the importance of making clear what is known and what is unknown.

In that spirit, I want to say that I have not seen the intelligence in question, I have not talked to anyone inside government about the intelligence, and I do not know what, if anything, the Administration has done in response or why they made any decisions they might have made about the issue. In the Q&A, you will find me reluctant to speculate on any of any that.

What I do know and therefore what I am able to answer questions about are: (1) How the collection, dissemination, and analytic processes of the Intelligence Community work; (2) How the PDB process worked over the 33 years I served at CIA; (3) Assuming that the IC thought the information credible at some level of confidence, how the policy process on something like this would have worked at senior levels in the Bush and Obama Administrations; and (4) What I would have done as the Acting or Deputy Director of CIA under different scenarios about what the raw intelligence showed and what the analysts thought of it.

With all that in mind, let me make eight brief points:

One, there is a misperception by many in the media about who receives raw intelligence. Many incorrectly assume it only goes to IC analysts, who decide what to pass on and in what context to intelligence consumers. That perception is not accurate. The truth is that raw intelligence gets disseminated widely – to intelligence analysts, yes, but also to war fighters in the field and at the Pentagon, to policymakers at State and DoD, as well as to senior White House officials via the White House Situation Room. The important point here is that many people would have already seen the raw intelligence as the analysts were just beginning their work.

Two, a key question with regard to the raw intelligence is whether it was clear to a reader what might be happening – that is, what the Russians might be doing – or if it was possible to put that together, to see that, only by connecting a number of dots. I don't know the answer to that question in this case. Importantly, though, in my experience, even if it was even only vaguely

clear that the Russians might be paying bounties to Taliban-associated militants for killing American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the US government, including the President -- before the analysts concluded their work.

Three, the lead IC agencies in assessing the information would have been the Central Intelligence Agency because of its role as the key all-source analytic agency on strategic issues and its key role in assessing overseas terrorism threats, the Defense Intelligence Agency because of the important role it plays in the analysis of force protection issues, and the National Counterterrorism Center because of its role on terrorism threat intelligence. The analysts would assess the information and come to two judgments -- (a) whether or not they believe Moscow was offering the bounties and, (b) if they believed that, what is their level of confidence in that judgment, low, medium, or high.

Four, if the analysts believed, at any level of confidence, that the Russians were providing the bounties, that judgment would be presented in the PDB. If the President does not read the PDB -- not all presidents have -- it would have been briefed to him, if not by the PDB briefer, then by the Director of National Intelligence or the Director of CIA or even those senior administration officials who were aware of analysis because they read the PDB or were briefed on it, such as the national security advisor, the White House chief of staff, and even the vice president.

Five, it is important to note that a dissent within the Intelligence Community on either the judgment itself or on the confidence level would not keep a piece out of the PDB. Rather, the dissent would be noted in the piece itself.

Six, once the piece was in the PDB, the IC leadership would, on something of this significance, brief Congress. I would have briefed the Gang of Eight as well as the full membership of the two intelligence committees either the same day the piece ran in the PDB or the day after.

Seven, if the IC assessed that the Russians were providing the bounties, again at any level of confidence, that would kick off a policy process inside the NSC staff on how the US should respond. The analysts' level of confidence would make a difference to that process and its outcome. A medium to high level of confidence would lead to a policy decision on how to proceed, while a low level of confidence would result in a decision that more intelligence was necessary before a decision could be taken on how to deal with the Russians on the matter. Tactical decision in Afghanistan would have moved forward at any level of confidence.

Eight, and finally, a medium-to-high level confidence judgment that the Russians were indeed offering the bounties would, in every administration I worked, have resulted in some sort of policy action designed to deter the Russians going forward. The safety of our troops would have required it.

Mr. Chairman, let me stop there, and I look forward to answering the Committee's questions.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Morell.  
I will now go to Dr. Wallander.

**STATEMENT OF CELESTE WALLANDER FORMER SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT AND SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR RUSSIA/CENTRAL ASIA, NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL**

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you. I thank the committee members for the invitation to contribute to your work. Today, I will summarize my written testimony, and for purposes of today's discussion, I will assume that the publicly reported details of the intelligence assessment are accurate.

These operations are embedded in a nearly decade-long Russian campaign of strategic competition that aims to weaken the United States and advance Russian power and influence. The Russian leadership recognizes that, while it is a peer to the United States in strategic nuclear capabilities, it does not match the United States in global power projection and in conventional military capabilities.

Russia seeks to compete where it has advantages in the asymmetric terrain and to avoid competition that could lead to its failure. Russia has invested in tools and methods to asymmetrically counter American advantages, whether those lie in extremist lies and social media, limited military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, cyber intrusions in networks and infrastructure abroad, or interfering in American and European politics.

Russia also deploys asymmetric tools to deny responsibility, however implausible that deniability has proven, in order to be able to operate with impunity and exploit ambiguities. This takes place in the phase zero end of the conflict spectrum, the sub-military conflict strategic environment in which diplomatic, informational, political, and economic conditions shape a country's capacity to secure its interests, short of active military confrontation.

The concept is not unique to Russian security doctrine, but its centrality and asymmetric nature is distinctive in Russian doctrine and operations. Russian asymmetric phase zero operations are conducted not only by political, but also Russian military actors, primarily Russian military intelligence, the GRU, and quasi-private actors such as the Wagner Group.

The earliest stages of operations in Ukraine in March 2014, political protests, were managed by GRU agents. The Russian operation to influence the U.S. 2016 Presidential election was a classic phase zero shaping operation, a mix of friendly foreign (WikiLeaks); quasi-private (Internet Research Agency); non-military; (the FSB), and Russian military actors.

The asymmetric phase zero framework helps to explain why the GRU has surfaced in a number of operations in Europe, the U.S., and now in Afghanistan. Across all of these cases, GRU operations are ambitious and sloppy. It is unlikely that President Putin personally approves every GRU operation. Yet, the GRU continues to operate, despite being exposed. This means that there is no question that it operates with political cover and approval at the highest levels of the Russian leadership, which is, therefore, responsible for these operations.

Why would the Russian leadership allow the GRU to play such a dangerous game? Because Russia has for years successfully managed asymmetric operations to keep the competition in spheres where it has operational advantages. It has exploited implausible deniability to operate in the asymmetric phase zero spectrum with impunity. Russia is succeeding.

In this specific case, it may be that Russia assessed that the Taliban was insufficiently active in striking coalition forces and needed incentives in order to hasten U.S. failure and withdrawal. It might be that Russia sought to complicate the U.S.-Taliban relationship. Whatever the strange reasoning may have been, this crosses a threshold. Russia is seeking to exploit implausibly deniable asymmetric operations now directly against U.S. military forces.

The Russian government has gotten away with its phase zero operations because we are not well equipped to compete in the asymmetric space, because we tend to view these operations as political, not security competition, and because we have all allowed the implausibly deniable to be denied and explained away.

The result has been a creeping escalation and exploitation of asymmetric operations that thwart effective U.S. response. Caution is warranted. The other end of the conflict spectrum is mutually assured destruction. But caution does not require paralysis. The United States should build defenses against these operations, it should disrupt these operations, and it should directly hold the Russian leadership accountable at the military, political, and top level of leadership. If we do not defend ourselves, if we do not disrupt these Russian operations, and we do not hold the Russian leadership accountable, it will continue and they may continue to escalate.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.  
[The prepared statement of Dr. Wallander follows:]

Celeste A. Wallander  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Hearing on “Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn’t the  
Administration Responded?”  
July 9, 2020 at 1pm

I thank the committee members for the invitation to contribute to your work. I hope to inform your understanding of what Russia has done and why it has done it. I want to explain how Russia’s actions have threatened American national security and undermined the defense of our interests. I speak in my personal capacity as an analyst of Russian security affairs for 35 years and not as the representative of any organization for which I work or have worked.

I will limit the scope of my testimony to Russia, leaving issues of intelligence and Afghanistan to my able panel colleagues. I will not attempt to address questions regarding confidence levels and completeness of the reported intelligence assessment. For the purposes of today’s discussion, I will assume that the publicly reported details are accurate.

To summarize my analysis: these recently reported operations are embedded in a nearly decade-long Russian campaign of strategic competition that aims to weaken the United States and advance Russian security. This campaign is focused on the “Phase Zero” end of the conflict spectrum and seeks to exploit Russia’s asymmetric advantages in sub-conventional military spheres, including covert and not-so-covert operations in Eurasia, Europe, and the United States. The Afghanistan bounty operation fits this campaign, but it also is an escalation within it that suggests Russia’s leadership is choosing increasingly risky actions in the belief it can continue to operate with impunity. The U.S. response must encompass improving our capabilities and defenses, eliminating vulnerabilities, closely working with NATO allies, and holding the Russian leadership accountable for its choices and actions.

**Russian security strategy, threat assessment, and risk-taking**

For nearly a decade – since Vladimir Putin regained the position of President in 2012 -- Russian foreign policy has been driven by the assessment that the United States seeks to weaken, constrain, encircle, and coerce the Russian Federation -- and ultimately to dictate Russian foreign and domestic affairs. Russia's security priority is the perceived American threat to Putin's Russia, and Russia has been engaged in a broad-spectrum strategic competition to weaken the U.S. and strengthen Russia, at home and abroad.

While building its conventional and nuclear military capabilities – strategic, regional, and theater -- the Russian Federation has also developed and refined non-military tools in its security strategy, notably cyber, informational, and economic-political influence instruments. The Russian security leadership recognizes that while it is a peer to the United States in strategic nuclear capabilities (notwithstanding its fears that missile defenses and new technologies may undermine the credibility of its secure second-strike capability), it does not match the United States in global power projection and conventional military capabilities. Russia's economy has also underperformed for nearly a decade and has not met the leadership's goals for higher growth to put Russia among the top global economies, which complicates defense spending.

As a result of its disadvantages, Russia has sought to exploit relative American vulnerabilities and has preferred to compete with the United States in asymmetric terrains, on four dimensions. First, the Russian leadership is unalterably convinced that the United States is engaged in a fully integrated political, economic, informational, and technology-enhanced strategy to constrain Russia and effect regime change. To compete in this space, Russia has invested in tools and methods to asymmetrically counter perceived American advantages. Anything is fair game when Russia's survival is at stake, whether that is



collecting embarrassing information on foreign officials or creating extremist lies on social media. Second, Russia seeks to compete where it has advantages in the asymmetric terrain, and to avoid competition that could lead to costly escalation, in the modern conventional military sphere against the United States military. Third, in order to hold the diplomatic high ground while avoiding an open military conflict with the United States, Russia has deployed asymmetric tools to protect the deniability of its actions to international (and domestic) audiences, however implausible that deniability has proven. And fourth, the Russian Federation has sought to escape the constraints of international law, customs, and norms of conduct, while claiming that the U.S., Europe, and others in the international community must be bound by them. When the U.S. and other countries play by the rules, cheating provides Russia with asymmetric advantages.

Russia's strategic competition therefore takes places primarily in the "Phase Zero" end of the conflict spectrum. "Phase Zero" refers to the sub-military conflict strategic environment in which diplomatic, informational, political, and economic conditions shape a country's capacity to secure its interests and prevent conflict from escalating to active military confrontation. The concept is not unique to Russian security doctrine (and indeed the concept plays a role in U.S. defense strategy) but its centrality and asymmetric nature is distinctive in Russian doctrine and operations. Since 2012 Russia has been engaged in active "Phase Zero" operations to compete with the United States and prevail without having to face the U.S. in a conventional military confrontation that Russian analysts assess it would be likely to lose.

In Russian military doctrine, competition with the United States in Phase Zero may be non-kinetic, but it is **not** strictly non-military. First, limited Russian military interventions in Ukraine (both Crimea and the Donbas in 2014) and Syria 2015-2016 were primarily military, with the goal of preventing the loss of Ukraine to Europe (and thus to the U.S., in Russian threat assessment) and the fall of the Assad regime to U.S. demands. Both operations were non-military with respect to the United

States directly, but both military operations were undertaken to counter and weaken the U.S. and sustain Russian power and influence – against the United States. And it continues: Russia now conducts the same type of limited military intervention in Libya against the government that has been recognized and supported by the United Nations.

Second, Russian Phase Zero operations against the United States entail actions by elements of the Russian military – primarily Russian military intelligence (the GRU<sup>1</sup>) and quasi-private actors such as the Wagner group. For example, the earliest stages of operations in the Donbas in March/April 2014 were managed by GRU agents, followed only in summer 2014 by the supply of regular Russian conventional military equipment, thinly veiled “volunteers,” and eventually regular Russian military forces (covert and unacknowledged). The Russian operation to influence the U.S. 2016 presidential election in order to achieve an outcome favorable to Russia was a classic Phase Zero shaping operation: a mix of friendly foreign (Wikileaks), quasi-private (the Internet Research Agency), non-military (FSB/SVR<sup>2</sup>), and Russian military (GRU) actors.

In short, while Russian Phase Zero operations are non-military in that they avoid direct conventional military conflict with the United States, military instruments and actors nonetheless play a role in ostensibly political, economic, and informational Russian operations to

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<sup>1</sup> GRU is the acronym for *Glavnoye razvedyvatelnoye upravleniye*, the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defense. It is Russia’s military intelligence service.

<sup>2</sup> FSB is the acronym for *Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, the Federal Intelligence Service. It is Russia’s core intelligence service, primarily but not exclusively focused on counterintelligence and domestic intelligence. SVR is the acronym for *Sluzhba vneshney razvedki*, the Foreign Intelligence Service. As the name makes clear, its mission is foreign intelligence and operations.

compete with the United States, weaken us, and enhance Russia's relative power and influence.

Since 2013, Russia has launched a growing number of high-risk Phase Zero operations. Russia has come to adopt a much more risk-acceptant posture in its Phase Zero operations for two reasons. First, Russia has heightened its assessment of the threat that the U.S. poses to the Putin system and Russia's freedom of action in the global sphere. Higher threat perception leads to a willingness to accept greater risk. Second, Russian leadership frames the issues at stake in terms of loss: loss of its sphere of influence in Ukraine, loss of a buffer zone in Central and South Asia, loss of a client regime in Syria, loss of internal sovereignty. When people believe that they are in a realm of loss (even if such a perception is self-serving and based in misperception or falsities), they are more willing to accept higher levels of risk in their actions to prevent further loss.

### **Russian ambivalence and pivot on Afghanistan**

A decade ago, we told ourselves that the United States and Russia shared the same interests in Afghanistan in the fight against al-Qaeda, and terrorist extremism more generally. Russia's interest in the defeat of al-Qaeda and its fear of extremist threats led Russia in 2009 to support the International Security Assistance Force and the Northern Distribution Network supply system by allowing ground- and air-transit of Russia territory. In the years that followed, Russia participated in numerous international and regional talks to bring a diplomatic end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

However, even during this positive period of the "reset," Russian government officials constantly pushed the United States to wrap up its military operations and go home. The Russian leadership was at best ambivalent about U.S. (and NATO) military presence in Afghanistan: it see-sawed between concern about extremism and growing alarm at (in

the Kremlin frame) NATO military encirclement of Russia from an arc starting in the Baltics, through the Black Sea and Caucasus, and into Central Asia and Afghanistan.

With the decisive break in U.S.-Russia relations in 2014 and America's shift to an active strategy of imposing costs and pressure on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's concern about instability and extremism in its Eurasian borderlands moved down the priority list. The overwhelming priority became countering U.S. presence and influence throughout Europe, the Middle East and Central/South Asia. Russia continued to participate in multilateral efforts to end the conflict in Afghanistan, but it also began to develop separate ties to the Taliban, providing it financial and military resources to challenge U.S.-led coalition training and support for the Afghan government's security operations. Russia has sought to hasten the departure of U.S. and coalition forces for years, and to develop ties with actors in Afghanistan in anticipation of that day.

That Russia seeks the end of U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan and has been investing in a relationship with the Taliban to influence Afghanistan in the future does not fully explain why it would take the risky, escalatory, and distasteful (in terms of professional military ethics) step of offering bounties for soldiers killed. It may be that Russia assessed that the Taliban was insufficiently active in striking coalition forces and needed incentives in order to hasten U.S. failure and withdrawal. It might be that Russia sought to complicate the U.S.-Taliban relationship to ensure that Russia would emerge with the stronger relationship with the beneficiary (the Taliban) of the coalition withdrawal. Many of the GRU's operations have been strange in intended effects and have backfired: in the end, Russia's reasoning may not make any sense to us.

Yet, while Russian meddling in Afghanistan and efforts to push the U.S. out are not new, the operation to conspire with criminal actors and Taliban fighters to target and kill American and coalition soldiers for

Russian payments crosses a threshold on risk and threat, seeking to exploit asymmetric operations to not only weaken the U.S. but kill our citizens with impunity. The GRU bounty operation reportedly dates back to 2019, before the February 2020 agreement for withdrawal of coalition forces and the Taliban's commitment not to attack U.S. or coalition forces. One would hope that this means the operation has been abandoned or is otherwise inoperative. Yet, if the reports are true, we have to take seriously what this escalation means for Russia's intentions and willingness to prosecute strategic competition.

### **Implausible Deniability and the Role of the GRU**

The asymmetric Phase Zero framework helps to explain why the GRU has surfaced in a number of operations in Europe, the U.S., and now in Afghanistan. As an instrument of Russian security, defense, and military policy, the GRU's role goes beyond standard military intelligence collection and battlefield support operations to active measures in Phase Zero competition to weaken adversaries and advance Russian power and interests. These operations have encompassed successful and attempted assassinations in Europe, political interference in Europe and the United States, and commissioning bounty-hunting to kill American and coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.

Across all of these cases, GRU operations are bold, and sloppy. The failures of operational security and professionalism suggests that the Russian leadership's elevated threat perception and risk-taking has resulted in approving a broader, bolder, and more active set of operations to achieve the leadership's objectives. Over the years, the GRU's operations (both botched and successful) have been repeatedly exposed, yet the GRU has nonetheless continued to engage in them. Americans often over-estimate President Putin's role in dictating and micro-managing affairs in Russia: Russia is a large country, has a huge government bureaucracy, and faces a host of problems and challenges. It is unlikely that Putin orders each GRU operation directly.

But the fact that the GRU has not been restrained or punished and operates over multiple years with impunity despite being exposed, means that there is no question that the GRU operates with political cover and approval at the highest levels of the Russian leadership. Whether that is Minister of Defense Shoigu (to whom the GRU technically reports), or Russian Security Council head Nikolai Patrushev (a Kremlin hard-liner who speaks most alarmingly about the U.S. threat, who served in the Soviet KGB, and directed the Russian FSB), or President Vladimir Putin himself, the Russian leadership has authorized and is therefore responsible for these operations.

Why would the Russian leadership allow the GRU to play such a dangerous game? Russia has for years successfully managed asymmetric operations to keep the competition in spheres where it has operational advantages. Unlike the United States or other democracies, the Russian government is not constrained in its dangerous overseas operations by an empowered Russian public or co-equal branch of government. It can act with virtually unconstrained domestic impunity.

More disturbing is how successfully Russia has prosecuted asymmetric competition with international impunity. We still refer to Ukrainian “separatists” as if national self-determination is at stake in Ukraine. Syria is nearly fully under the Assad regime’s control after Russia patiently exploited ceasefire agreements to successfully destroy opposition forces and prosecute the war. GRU officers travel freely throughout Europe conducting Phase Zero political de-stabilization, and assassination attempts against EU citizens. And Russia has now crept over the line from asymmetric political operations to attacks against American military forces, through a dishonorable proxy military operation.

### **Steps to Right the Balance**

The Russian government has gotten away with its Phase Zero operations in part because we are not well-equipped to compete in that asymmetric space. Russia has also gotten away with them because U.S. and European leaders tend to view these operations as political, not part of the national security spectrum. That framework is mistaken. And most importantly, the Russian leadership has gotten away with them because we have all allowed the Implausibly Deniable to pass as deniable, murky, ambiguous, or “gray zone.”

The result has been a creeping escalation and exploitation of asymmetric operations that are meant to complicate an effective U.S. response. American caution is warranted: the other end of the conflict spectrum is mutually assured destruction. Caution, however, does not require paralysis, nor implausible denial.

*Step One: Defense*

Policy discussions on Russia tend immediately to go to imposing costs and deterrence. But the first step needs to be building defenses against Russian asymmetric competition. The U.S. (and allies) must invest in better monitoring, tracking, and defense capabilities against Russia’s implausibly deniable actors and agents. The effectiveness of these operations erodes when they are publicized. When Russia’s delivery of the SA-11 and its use to destroy MH-17 along with its 298 passengers in Ukraine in 2014 was publicly exposed, Russia immediately withdrew the system and halted delivery of high-altitude surface-to-air weapons systems to its proxy forces in the Donbas. Public exposure erodes Russia’s operational capabilities.

The U.S. and its allies could also do much better in constraining and complicating the operational freedom that Russia’s asymmetric agents and actors enjoy. Expulsion of Russian agents from the United States and Europe following election interference and assassination operations eroded, for a time, Russia’s capabilities. Combined with better monitoring and information sharing, the U.S. and Europe could

shut down or at least limit the effectiveness of gray zone exploiters and operators.

More broadly, Russia's asymmetric campaign has struck at Europe as well as the U.S., so coordination and a common approach with NATO allies should be at the core of the U.S. response strategy. A unified response prevents Russia from being able to find seams and vulnerabilities in our strategy. It allows the U.S. and European countries to pool information and resources, enhancing our capabilities to protect ourselves from Phase Zero exploitation operations.

*Step Two: Eliminate Vulnerabilities*

The next step is to mitigate our own weaknesses and the vulnerabilities Russian asymmetric operations have exploited in order to thwart or at least limit their effectiveness. Private sector social media companies have begun to take these steps, so we know that it can be effective. Russian asymmetric operations require financing, so governments should look at regulations to prevent the use of financial organizations in facilitating monetary flows that support Russian intelligence operations.

*Step Three: Hold Russia accountable*

The Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should communicate this to the Russian Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff: you are held accountable for the actions of those who serve in the Russian military under your command, and this incident is unprofessional and not worthy of a peer relationship, however competitive. Insofar as possible, the U.S. should lay out the evidence and not take this issue off the table until there is an acceptable answer, and acknowledgement that this is beyond the bounds, and will not recur. The Russian military sees itself as a peer competitor to the U.S. military, and constantly demands to be treated as such. The Russian military



pushed to go beyond de-confliction in Syria to intelligence sharing and cooperation against common threats. Instead, the Russian military has engaged in the dirty business of paying a bounty to strike at the U.S. military. The U.S. military has something the Russian military values and seeks: mutual professional respect. The U.S. defense leadership must make clear how the Russian military must conduct itself to earn that respect.

If the Russian security/military leadership is willing to acknowledge the need for a code of conduct based upon professionalism – not cooperation, but communication in order to end the implausible deniability game – Congress should support the communication channel with an explicit carve-out from its prohibition on military-to-military cooperation. Communication is not cooperation (which is working together to achieve common objectives, which are few and far between in current circumstances, and therefore unlikely even without Congressional prohibitions): its purpose would be to restrain Russian exploitation of its asymmetric advantages, and thus be in American self-interest.

*Step Four: Impose targeted, effective, and removeable costs*

If the Russian government refuses to take responsibility, or refuses to agree to a code of conduct that pulls back from the more egregious violations of international law, diplomatic norms, and military professionalism, the U.S. then must look at imposing costs that would negatively impact the cost-benefit calculation of Russian leaders with the power and responsibility for dangerous activities. Those costs could be sanctions and restrictions on officials or organizations, but they should be targeted to be effective. The targets should be officials and institutions in the security sector, or serious systemic financial sanctions tied to precise and specific behavioral changes by the Russian leadership. Scattershot sanctions against Russian business will not provide leverage for behavioral change in the security and military

sphere, and should be avoided. The message needs to be clear, precise, credible, and targeted on the source of the threat to U.S. security.

Thank you for allowing me to contribute to your work on this issue, and I look forward to your questions and insights on this challenge we face together.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Dr. Wallander.  
We will next go to General Nicholson. General.

**STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON (RETIRED),  
FORMER COMMANDER OF U.S. FORCES—AFGHANISTAN AND  
NATO'S RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION**

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member, for the honor to appear before this committee. And it is also a pleasure to be alongside such distinguished colleagues. I will summarize some of the major points from my written submission.

History tells us that miscalculations and mistakes are what leads to war. And, of course, they are especially dangerous with respect to the United States and Russia because of our substantial nuclear arsenals. And if, indeed, they did this, this will be a serious miscalculation and a serious mistake.

As we know, there were periods of shared interest and some cooperation in Afghanistan. Up through 2012, logistical cooperation through the Northern Distribution Network was a positive aspect of our relationship with Russia. But, after 2014, that changed with the annexation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine, the threats to the eastern States of the NATO alliance. Within NATO where I was the Allied Land Commander at the time, we began drawing up defensive plans for the first time in the 25 years since the end of the cold war. When I moved from Turkey to Afghanistan in 2016, by that time, the Russians had intervened in Syria and, of course, we saw a major focus by the United States on ISIS and Syria.

But, at that time also, we saw a modest increase in capabilities by the Russians in Central Asia. And, of course, we discussed this up our chain of command and through intelligence and military channels. Myself, General Votel, General Scaparrotti, Secretary Mattis, all addressed this publicly. And let me go a little bit into that because it ties into what the other witnesses are referring to.

What we saw was a pattern that they had used in Crimea, Ukraine, the Baltics, and Syria of using military exercises as a way to move capabilities and people into an area and, then, leave some behind. This would desensitize us to their presence. It would generate options for them. And obviously, it would reduce our warning times, should they choose to use these capabilities. This slow, gradual buildup, while we were focused primarily on Syria, was of concern enough to me as commander that we highlighted this and, eventually, called them out.

At this same time, they were arming and equipping and giving money to the Taliban. Now it was in modest quantities. It was not designed to be a game changer on the battlefield. For example, the Taliban wanted surface-to-air missiles; the Russians did not give them to them. So, I always concluded that their support to the Taliban was calibrated in some sense. But just because it was calibrated does not mean that it was not important and it did not cause us difficulties. In the northern part of Afghanistan, in particular, in Kunduz, this Russian assistance did help the Taliban to inflict higher casualties on the Afghan Security Forces and more hardship on the Afghan people.

Despite all of this, I was somewhat surprised to read the reports of Russian involvement in bounties because this is so risky and irresponsible that it would mark a departure from this previously calibrated approach. And, of course, the layers of complexity inside the Russian decisionmaking process and inside Afghanistan are baffling even to those who know these areas deeply. But, if this is validated, regardless of who made this decision and whether it was made in Moscow or made in the field, regardless of whether Russian leaders were complicit directly or they were merely incompetent in their failure to control operations, they are still responsible. It is also important to note that there were two sides of this transaction: the Russians offered and the Taliban accepted. And this is in direct contradiction to the spirit and the letter of the Afghan peace agreement.

So, if we assess that Russia put bounties on Americans and coalition members, then what should we do about it?

No. 1, we need to condemn this action from the highest levels of the U.S. Government and NATO, so that the Russians understand it is unacceptable.

Two, with respect to Russia, we should suspend any troop withdrawals from Germany. These troop withdrawals play into Russian desires to undermine and weaken NATO. If carried out despite these bounties, this will be viewed as a sign of American weakness in the face of Russian threats.

Three, with respect to the Taliban, we should hold on our troop drawdown in Afghanistan at the present level until the Taliban have met the conditions that they agreed to in the peace agreement. We have delivered on our part by drawing down to 8600 ahead of schedule. The Taliban needs to deliver on theirs. And this includes severing ties with Al Qaeda, reentering Afghan peace negotiations, and a sustained reduction in violence.

Our long war in Afghanistan is only going to end at the peace table, and as leaders, we all have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our service members who are fighting for an enduring peace in Afghanistan and to deliver on the sacrifice of the Americans, the coalition members, and the Afghans who came before them.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Nicholson follows:]

General John Nicholson US Army Retired  
 President, PENFED Foundation  
 Former Commander NATO RESOLUTE SUPPORT & US Forces Afghanistan 2016-2018  
 House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
 9 July 2020 Russian Bounties

Chairman Engel and Ranking Member McCaul, thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to appear with such a distinguished group of colleagues. As a Soldier, I believe nothing is more important than protecting our national security and the lives of our service members. The issue of Russian involvement in the Afghan War is an essential part of protecting our troops and protecting our progress towards an enduring peace. I thank you for highlighting this issue for the American people.

History tells us that miscalculations and mistakes lead to war. Miscalculations and mistakes between Russia and the United States are especially dangerous because of our substantial nuclear arsenals. The offering of bounties by Russian operatives to the Taliban for killing Americans and our Coalition partners would constitute both a serious miscalculation and a significant mistake on their part.

When I served in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2012, we shared some interests with the Russians in terms of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics and cooperated with them on military logistics through our Northern Distribution Network. By 2014, when I was the Commander of NATO Allied Land Command in Turkey, things had changed. With the Russian annexation of Crimea, invasion of Ukraine and threatening behavior towards the eastern states of the NATO Alliance, we drafted defensive plans for the first time in the 25 years since the end of the Cold War. In September 2015, they intervened in Syria and tensions worsened. By the time I moved from Turkey to Afghanistan in March of 2016, the Russians had undertaken a significant air and ground campaign to prop up the Assad regime.

From 2016-2018, while the primary US focus was on Syria and ISIS, there was a growth of Russian presence in Central Asia. No doubt some of this was motivated by uncertainty over US intentions and the potential instability which would follow a US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. The pattern was similar to what we had seen in the Baltics, Crimea, Ukraine and Syria where military exercises were used to move capabilities into an area; desensitize the US and NATO Allies to their presence and intentions and reduce our warning times. Capability creates options and they were positioning capabilities to have options to play a larger role.

They also began arming and funding Taliban elements across northern and eastern Afghanistan. They justified these actions with a false narrative that the United States was supporting the Islamic State Khorasan Province (the Afghan affiliate of ISIS) with the intent to destabilize central Asia and Russia, a narrative they promoted at the highest levels.

At the time, my conclusion was that Russian support to the Taliban was 'calibrated'. The Taliban wanted anti-aircraft missiles, but the Russians didn't provide them. However, they

provided enough small arms, ammo and money to sustain the Taliban in the fight and gain influence in advance of an anticipated US/NATO withdrawal. While this assistance did not significantly alter the tactical balance on the battlefield, it helped the Taliban inflict more casualties on the Afghan security forces and more hardship on the Afghan people. This was particularly relevant in the north of Afghanistan, the Kunduz area. In this sense, the Russians sought to undermine the US and NATO and further destabilize Afghanistan. Within US Forces Afghanistan at the time, we highlighted the growing Russian capabilities up the chain of command and took measures to better monitor their activities. We publicized their support to the Taliban through US and NATO channels and countered their false narratives in public.

Despite all of this, I was somewhat surprised to read stories of Russian involvement in bounties, a risky and irresponsible move which would mark a departure from their previously calibrated approach. The layers of complexity in Afghanistan coupled with shifting internal Russian dynamics will take some time to decipher. But if this is validated, regardless of who made the decision or where it was made, regardless of whether Russian leaders were complicit or merely incompetent in their failure to control operations, they are still responsible.

It's important to note that, there were two sides to this transaction. Russians offered and the Taliban accepted. Deliberate attacks on Americans and our Coalition partners are in violation of the spirit and letter of the peace agreement. Along with continued high levels of Taliban violence, this action further reveals that the Taliban are not meeting conditions for advancement of the peace process.

If we assess that Russia put bounties on American and Coalition lives, what should we do in response?

1. Condemn this action from the highest levels of the United States government and NATO so the Russians understand it is unacceptable and undermines any chance of improving relations and cooperation on areas of mutual interest.
2. With respect to Russia, suspend any troop withdrawals from Germany. These troop withdrawals play into Russian desires to undermine and weaken NATO. If carried out despite these bounties, this will be viewed as a sign of American weakness in the face of Russian threats. Thank you for considering an NDAA that includes a provision which "bans the administration from lowering troop levels below current levels until 180 days after Pentagon leaders present a plan to Congress and certify it will not harm U.S. or allied interests."
3. With respect to the Taliban, hold the troop drawdown in Afghanistan at the present level until the Taliban meet conditions stipulated in the peace agreement. We have delivered on our part of the peace agreement in drawing down to 8600 troops ahead of schedule; the Taliban must deliver on theirs. We should not resume our drawdown until they meet the required conditions which include severing ties with Al Qaeda, intra-Afghan peace negotiations and a sustained reduction in violence. Thank you for including the Crow/Cheney amendment in the current NDAA.

Conclusion. Our long war in Afghanistan will only end at the peace table. The current peace process rests on a foundation of hard-fought gains by the Afghan security forces supported by America and its coalition partners. In recent months, each time we see progress towards peace, we see an increase in violence by the Taliban who are supported by Russia. Russia's support, while calibrated in the past, is designed to undermine the success of the peace process and erode our will. As leaders, we all have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our service members who are fighting for an enduring peace in Afghanistan and deliver on the sacrifice of those Americans, Coalition members and Afghans who came before them.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, General.

Mr. Brzezinski.

I think you may be on mute. There you go.

**STATEMENT OF IAN BRZEZINSKI, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR EUROPE AND NATO, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Mr. Chairman, can you hear me now?

Mr. CASTRO. Yes.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Thank you.

Chairman Castro, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the committee, Americans are rightly outraged by reports of Russia placing bounties on U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan. These reports, as heinous as they are, underscore a broader challenge confronting the West: Russia's pattern of escalating aggressive international conduct.

Over the last decade and a half, Moscow has applied the full suite of Russian power to dominate its neighbors, create division in the West, and position Russia as a global power. The suite of tools has included military and paramilitary forces, economic and energy embargoes, assassination and political subterfuge, information and cyber warfare, separatist groups, and frozen conflicts. That campaign history includes a 2007 cyber attack on Estonia, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro, assassinations in the United Kingdom, Germany, just last week in Austria, and elsewhere.

As the committee has documented, Russia has meddled not only in the elections of our allies, but even in our own elections. This willingness to directly attack the United States took a kinetic dimension in Syria in 2018. There, Russian paramilitary units attacked outposts known to be manned by U.S. Special Operations Forces. In light of all this, recent reports of Russia's bounties on American soldiers are disturbingly consistent with what has been a steady escalation of Russian international interference and aggression.

Now, over the past decade and a half of this, the West's response, including that of the United States, to Russia's assertiveness has consisted of limited incremental escalations of economic sanctions and military deployments, complemented by half-hearted and short-lived diplomatic isolation. This incrementalism conveys hesitancy and a lack of unity and determination on behalf of the United States and the Western alliance. It has failed to convince Putin to reverse course and it may have actually emboldened him. Continued incrementalism not only promises continued confrontation with Russia, it increases the risk of conflict, both intentional and unintentional.

U.S. strategy regarding Putin's Russia needs to be calibrated to this reality. Properly calibrated engagement entails exploring avenues through which to modulate tension and foster collaboration. But it also requires more immediate and stronger measures to deter and counter Russian aggression and provocation. Toward those ends, U.S. strategy should include the following priorities:

First, we need to increase NATO's readiness for high-intensity conflict. Russia's military modernization efforts and its concentra-



tion of forces on its western frontier have increased the risk of conflict in Europe. This reality, of course, underscores the need for our NATO allies to continue increasing their military capability and readiness. But there is more the U.S. can and should do. We should transition the U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team in Poland and related elements to a permanent presence. The U.S. should also permanently station in the Baltics a Special Forces contingent. President Trump should reconsider his decision to withdraw U.S. forces in Germany. Removing forces from Europe weakens our deterrent posture in Europe at a time when the threat from Russia is increasing. It signals a lack of commitment to European security that President Putin will surely relish.

Second, we need to more robustly support the transatlantic aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine. NATO enlargement expanded the zone of peace and security in Europe and strengthened the alliance's military capability. Both Ukraine and Georgia should be provided a clear path to NATO membership. Perpetuating their position in a zone of geopolitical ambiguity only animates Putin's appetite and sense of opportunity to reassert dominion over these two democracies.

Third, we need to more effectively counter Russia's dissemination of false information. In this realm, the United States essentially disarmed itself when it closed the doors in 1999 of the United States Information Agency. This multibillion agency was our front-line force on the information front. Congress should reestablish or establish a modernized version of USIA, so that the United States can return to the offense in this dynamic and fast-paced dimension of international affairs.

Fourth, we should increase economic sanctions on Russia. Today's sanctions may impair the Russian economy, but if their intended outcome has been to deter Russian aggression, they have failed by that measure. Sanctions should be escalated from measures primarily aimed against specific Russian individuals and firms to more comprehensive sectoral sanctions against Russian financial and energy sectors.

Finally, we need to strengthen Western cohesion and unity. These aforementioned actions will only be fully effective if they are complemented by unity and purpose in action within the transatlantic community.

So, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, as you and the committee address the intelligence regarding Russian bounties, I urge you to also assess the effectiveness of U.S. policy in terms of deterring, countering, and containing the full spectrum of Moscow's malign ambitions and actions. When it comes to Russia, time is long overdue for an unequivocal U.S. policy.

Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Brzezinski follows:]

Statement by Ian J. Brzezinski  
Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

Hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives  
Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?  
9 July 2020

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the Committee, Americans are rightly outraged by reports of Russia placing bounties on the deaths of US military personnel in Afghanistan. These reports, as heinous as they are, underscore a broader challenge confronting the West: Russia's pattern of escalating, aggressive international conduct. As we address this extremely troubling intelligence, we should also be assessing the effectiveness of US policy in terms of deterring, countering, and containing the full spectrum of Moscow's malign ambitions and actions.

Under President Putin, Russia turned away from the liberal, rules-based international order and the democratic principles we hoped it would embrace in an enduring way following the end of the Cold War.

Instead Moscow has adopted a revanchist agenda intended to reanimate Russian hegemony, if not full control, over the space of the former Soviet Union and re-establish Russia as a global great power. Towards, these ends, Moscow has worked to undermine the cohesion of the Western Alliance, disrupt the politics of our nation and that of our allies and partners, and promote a nationalist authoritarian ideology as a replacement for liberal democracy.

Towards these ends, Moscow has applied the full suite of Russian power to weaken and dominate its neighbors: military and para-military forces, economic and energy embargoes, political subterfuge, information and cyber-warfare, separatist groups, and frozen conflicts.

This campaign history spans over a decade and a half. It leverages the products of a ten year military modernization plan that has significantly upgraded Russian conventional and nuclear forces. Over that period, that campaign has become steadily more provocative, brazen, and aggressive.

It includes Moscow's attempt to subvert Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia – a NATO ally, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the continued occupation of Georgian and Ukrainian territory.

In addition to direct attacks on the territory of its neighbors, Russia regularly conducts assertive naval and air patrols and harasses allied military aircraft and ships. It recently updated its military doctrine to lower the threshold of nuclear conflict.

Russia has also proven itself to be notorious in the realm of subterfuge and assassination. In 2016, Russian intelligence attempted a coup in Montenegro to prevent that nation from joining NATO. Moscow has undertaken assassinations in the United Kingdom and Germany and in other countries it has hunted down and killed those critical of its regime and governance.

As the committee has documented, Russia has meddled in the elections of not only our allies and partners, but even in our own elections.

In Syria, Russian ground and air forces support a regime that has used chemical weapons against its own people. Just this week Russian aircraft executed indiscriminate strikes against schools, hospitals and markets in Idlib province. In Libya, Moscow has recently reinforced its para-military forces supporting renegade General Khalifa Haftar with air defense systems and aircraft. Moscow's interventions in Syria and Libya feature the deployment of para-military forces from the Russia's Wagner Group. In February 2018 in Syria, Russian para-military forces, supported by tanks, attacked outposts known to be manned by US special operations forces. This unprecedented attack on US forces was launched despite warnings from U.S. commanders in the region to their Russian counterparts.

In light of all this, recent reports of Russia's bounties for the deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan are disturbingly consistent with what has been a steady escalation of Russian international interference, provocation and aggression – a campaign that pursues 20<sup>th</sup> century objectives leveraging 21<sup>st</sup> century techniques and old fashioned brute force.

#### **Calibrating the West's Response**

The West's response to Russia's assertiveness over this last decade and a half has consisted of limited incremental escalations of economic sanctions and military deployments complemented by half-hearted and short lived diplomatic isolation.

This incrementalism conveys hesitancy and a lack of unity and determination on behalf of the United States and the Western Alliance. It has failed to convince Putin to reverse course. Indeed, it may have actually emboldened him. Continued incrementalism not only promises continued confrontation with Russia, it increases the risk of conflict, both that intentionally driven by Putin and unintentional conflict catalyzed by Putin's growing overconfidence.

US strategy regarding Putin's Russia needs to be calibrated to this reality. Properly calibrated engagement entails exploring avenues through which to modulate tension, including arms control and means through which return to Georgia and Ukraine territories that continue to be occupied by Russia.

Calibrated engagement will also require more immediate and long term measures to deter and counter Russian aggression and provocation. Toward those ends, US strategy toward Russia should include the following priorities:

**Increasing the Alliance's Readiness for High Intensity Conflict:** Russia's military modernization efforts, increased concentration of forces on its eastern frontier, large-scale military exercises, and a more aggressive nuclear doctrine have increased the risk of high intensity warfare in Europe, the like of which we have not had to face since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Some tangible progress has been made on this front. The United States ended two decades of draw-downs in Europe by returning a limited contingent of heavy combat units to that continent and increasing US weapons stocks there. As part of this force posture shift, the US army has deployed to Poland on a rotational basis a US armored brigade and army combat aviation. Both the Obama and Trump administrations are to be commended for that presence in Poland, as should our NATO Allies for deploying multinational battalions to each of the Baltic States as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and for recent progress toward meeting their commitments to spend the equivalent of 2% of their respective GDP on defense.

However, the force balance along the NATO's eastern frontier remains disturbingly in favor of Russia. To address this challenge, Canada and our European Allies must continue to increase their military capability and readiness. Their investments should aim to address longstanding NATO shortfalls, including air and missile defense, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance and long-range fires, among others. Time is long overdue for the Allies to carry their share of the security burden.

As the leader of NATO, there is more the US can and should do. Washington should transition the rotational deployment of its armored brigade combat team in Poland to a permanent presence. The division level headquarters the US plans to place in Poland should also be a permanent stationing. This would increase the combat effectiveness our forces in Europe, underscore US commitment to NATO, and deepen the operational ties between US and Polish forces in ways useful for local contingencies and those beyond Europe. The US should also consider permanently stationing to the Baltics states a special forces element to help reinforce the defense of that region.

The President of the United States should also reconsider his recent decision to withdraw US forces from Germany, a decision that portends to reduce military US presence in Europe when the threat posed by Russia is increasing. It unnecessarily weakens a key bilateral relationship in the Western Alliance, including our ability to operate at maximum effectiveness with German and other allied forces. It undercuts NATO's ability to reinforce the Alliance's eastern front. It communicates a lack of commitment to European security that President Putin will surely relish. (Indeed, we should not forget that USG plans announced in 2004 to withdraw forces from Europe were followed by Russia's 2006 invasion of Georgia and similar USG plans announced in 2012 were followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014.)

**Supporting the Sovereignty and Transatlantic Aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine:** The NATO Alliance, led by the United States, should substantively embrace and support the

membership aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia. NATO enlargement is one of the great success stories of the post-Cold War era. It expanded the zone of peace and security in Europe and strengthened the Alliance's military capability.

The recent elevation of Ukraine's relationship with NATO to that of Enhanced Opportunities Partner will deepen their cooperation, but both Ukraine and Georgia should be provided a clear path to NATO membership, recognizing it will take time meet the Alliance's political and military requirements. Perpetuating their position in a zone of geopolitical ambiguity – a grey zone in Europe's strategic landscape – only animates President Putin's sense of opportunity to reassert dominion over these two European democracies.

**Countering Russian Hybrid-Warfare – The Information Domain:** A key and increasingly assertive element of Putin's campaign of disruption against the West has been its generation and dissemination abroad of false and divisive information to manipulate public perceptions and to foment political tension if not social and political unrest. While the United States, our allies and partners and our key multinational institutions, including NATO and the European Union, have become more aware and better equipped to expose Russian disinformation efforts, the West, including Washington, remains very much on the defensive.

The United States essentially unilaterally disarmed itself in the information realm in 1999 when Washington shut down the United States Information Agency. This multi-billion-dollar agency and its staff of over 10,000 professionals was dedicated to the mission of public diplomacy. It was established "to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics in the promotion of the national interest" and to "streamline the U.S. Government's overseas information programs and make them more effective." USIA was our frontline sentinel on the information front during the Cold War and a critical element in our victory in that era. After USIA closed its doors, its founding purpose has only become more important and more complex as evidenced by current events.

Congress should consider recreating a modernized version of USIA so that the United States can return to the offense in this increasingly dynamic and faced paced dimension of international affairs. Succeeding in this realm is critical to reinforcing the resilience of our alliances and partnerships. It can and should play an important role in our efforts to shape the internal political dynamics of our adversaries – leveraging the power of public engagement, democratic principles, and truth to undercut the authority of authoritarian regimes and to give hope, motivation and support to those yearning and struggling for freedom.

**Increasing Economic Sanctions on Russia:** Current economic sanctions imposed on Russia have proven insufficient. For six years, Moscow has refused to withdraw from Crimea and eastern Ukraine. It continues to occupy territories of Georgia. Its provocations against these and other Western democracies have continued and escalated. Today's sanctions may be hurting the Russian economy, especially in the context of low oil prices, but if their intended outcome has been to deter Russian aggression, they have failed by that measure.

The West, led by the United States, should move to escalate those measures from targeted sanctions aimed against specific Russian individuals and firms to broader and more comprehensive sectoral sanctions against the Russian financial and energy sectors.

**Strengthening Western Cohesion and Unity:** These aforementioned actions will only be fully effective if they are complemented by unity in purpose and action among the democratic community of nations – and particularly those of the Transatlantic Community. That unity will require steadfast US leadership and commitment to the principles and institutions that were critical to the West’s victory in the Cold War and since then has been responsible for the expansion and sustainment of freedom, security and prosperity across Europe.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, as the committee evaluates reports on Russian bounties against US military personnel, I would urge it to also assess the overall effectiveness of US strategy regarding Russia over the last decade and determine how the United States should calibrate its efforts to more effectively deter Russian’s escalating malign conduct and aggression and foster a more stable, if not more cooperative relationship, with Moscow. The time is long overdue for an unequivocal US policy.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski, and thank you to all the witnesses for your testimonies.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each. And pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will come back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally. And as we start questioning, I will start by recognizing myself.

I want to ask a question of Mr. Morell first. In instances where the Russians paid to have American service members killed, and it appears from press accounts, at least some press accounts, that the Russian plot results in American deaths, in your experience as somebody who carried out the Presidential Daily Briefing, is this something that intelligent briefers would make the President aware of?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir, without a doubt.

Mr. CASTRO. Is there anyone on the panel, based on your own expertise, who believes that the President would not have been made aware of this information? Anyone?

[No response.]

No one? Thank you.

In the event that the President's advisors really withheld such alarming intelligence from him, even as he made continuous concessions to Russia, who would ultimately be responsible for such process failures, mid-level career civil servants or administration leadership? And I ask that of anyone on the panel. If, for example, the intelligence was somehow not provided to him, then where does the failure lie?

Mr. MORELL. Congressman, maybe I can jump in here, having been in the Oval Office every morning with President Bush for a year and, then, many times with President Obama. If the President's briefer did not raise something of such importance, then I believe it falls on whoever else is there from the intelligence community, the DNI or the Director of CIA. And barring their failure to raise such information, I think it falls on the responsibility of the National Security Advisor to make absolutely certain the President knows.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay.

Dr. WALLANDER. Could I add to Mike's point?

Mr. CASTRO. Sure.

Dr. WALLANDER. Which is that every morning in the Obama White House, among the duties of the senior directors was to read the PDBs in advance of the presentation of the PDB to the President by the briefers, and to provide for the National Security Advisor—in our case, Susan Rice—advice and context, because she would go in and be part of that briefing and be ready to make sure that, as Mike pointed out, the briefing had been received and correctly understood by the White House leadership.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay. And we have about 2 minutes left on my questioning.

Some of you in your remarks, your testimony, suggested different courses of action, different responses that the United States could

take. I want to ask you this question: so far, as I mentioned in my remarks, there has been not even a public condemnation by the President or the White House against Russia for these reported actions. Let me ask you this—and we only have about a minute and 45 seconds—what is the cost of the United States not even saying a word to Russia about these reported actions?

Mr. MORELL. Congressman, let me jump in here again. I did not make any recommendations about what steps the U.S. should take, but I think it is really important that we all recognize something about Vladimir Putin's personality. He is a risk-taker. And when he takes a risk and he succeeds in his mind, he is often willing to take even larger risks in the future. So, the failure for him to face any cost here I think significantly increases the chances of him doing something else to undermine the United States, possibly even larger than what we have seen in this case.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Mr. Chairman?

Mr. CASTRO. Yes, Mr. Brzezinski?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Allow me to complement Director Morell's point. When we do push back on Putin and push back firmly, he does respond. He is ultimately a pragmatist. And as Dr. Wallander pointed out, he picks his battles carefully.

When looking back to Russia's invasion on Georgia in 2008, the turning point of that conflict occurred when the United States demonstrated some military muscle. The United States flew back Georgian soldiers to their capital, Tbilisi via a military cargo plane right in the middle of that conflict, demonstrating, readiness to take sacrifices, basically Putin with the risk of a direct military confrontation with the United States. And that was basically the turning point of that invasion. That action convinced Putin to end that invasion.

So, if we are more forceful, if we are more firm, we do have very good prospects of actually restraining Putin's actions and ambitions.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski.

And I am going to keep myself on time on the questioning. So, I will go over to Ranking Member Mike McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just, without commenting on the specifics of the intelligence, there was a very strong dissent. The briefer was a career intelligence officer that made this decision not to brief. And I guess the question is whether it is actionable intelligence.

Having said that, I think the nature of this intelligence being targeted at U.S. troops would be a significant departure for Russia in its dealings with the Taliban. Now I personally think that the President deserved to at least know about this. I think, if true—and I know that the intelligence community is going back and doing a deep dive—I do think Russia should be condemned and the GRU should be sanctioned, as we have authorized by Congress.

My first question is to General Nicholson. You have been in Afghanistan for quite some time. And let me say, all the panelists are very, very impressive with your testimony. I think this calls into question the good faith of the Taliban. I do think, though, since the peace plan has been entered into, there have been no Americans targeted, although they are targeting Afghan nationals.



Can you tell me, No. 1, how significant of a departure this would be? Because we know they are arming and giving cash to the Taliban to kill ISIS, but this would be a different policy change to target American troops. And second, does it call into question the good-faith negotiating of the Taliban?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

I do think it calls into question the good faith of the Taliban. There are two parts to this transaction, again, if validated. But we do know that the Russians have provided small arms, ammunition, money to the Taliban, and have been doing it for some time. And frankly, the ability to direct that and control it, and where it is used and where it is not used, is extremely limited. Once it is turned over to them, they will use it as they see fit.

And I have no doubt that some of that was used in the northern part of Afghanistan against Afghan units with American advisors, especially in the Kunduz area. And so, I think that, in this sense, now specifically offering bounties is a small step from what they were already doing. Their justification for this action was the fight against ISIS, but part of this was, as the other witnesses have mentioned, a false narrative and misinformation on the part of Russia that the United States was supporting ISIS.

So, I think that this does call into question the Taliban's commitment to the agreement. As I mentioned in my statement, they need to sever ties with Al Qaeda; there should be a sustained reduction in violence, and they need to begin the peace talks that they are committed to do on——

Mr. MCCAUL. If I could reclaim my limited time, I note that Ambassador Rahmani, Afghanistan, our Special Envoy, they are having discussions this week about a humanitarian cease-fire. My concern is all the good work that you have done over there, if the Taliban overruns Afghanistan and takes over, then we have a safe haven for many years to come.

How do you view the peace plan moving forward? I always believe, whether it is Syria or Iraq, we need a residual force, if anything, to protect the homeland. What are your thoughts on force reduction?

General NICHOLSON. I think that this level of 8600, we should hold there until the Taliban delivers on their portion of the peace agreement and we move to the next stage. So, I do think that is important. I do think there is a threat from the region in terms of the multitude of terrorist groups that are over there. We have over 20 designated groups, U.S.-designated groups, in the region. And I think that, with the government in Afghanistan, we should consider, if they ask us to stay and request our help to keep pressure on these groups, it is definitely something we should consider.

Mr. MCCAUL. I can tell you from the Ambassador they do.

Let me ask real quickly, Secretary Brzezinski, the President's decision in Germany, I sent a letter with Adam Kinzinger saying this sends a bad message to NATO forces, to Putin, CENTCOM, AFRICOM. However, if they move some of these forces as they talked about, the National Security Advisor, to Poland and the Baltic nations, describe to me how that would work, and would that be an even better strategy?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. It would be better than pulling the forces back from Germany to the United States. But I do not think we ought to be punishing Germany to the benefit of Poland. We need a robust presence in Poland and we have one now, which I think is an appropriate level. I would make it more permanent. But that is a frontline presence. You want your rearguard, your rear echelons, to also be robust. We need a robust presence in Germany, so not only we can reinforce the Baltics, we can also reinforce southern Europe. And then, of course, we need a robust presence in Germany if we want to have a robust military relationship with the Germans and other militaries of the NATO alliance.

So, this decision by the President is undercutting not only our relationship with Germany, it is undercutting our operational efficiency to reinforce our frontline forces in Poland and frontline operations in the Baltics. So, this is a potential, if it gets executed, a real setback, a weakening of our deterrent posture in Europe.

Mr. McCAUL. I have talked to the Ambassadors in the Baltic States and Poland, and they would, obviously, very much welcome our presence there.

And I know, Mr. Chairman, my time has expired. You have been very generous.

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

We will go to Congressman Brad Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you.

I want to thank our witnesses for coming before us, but the loudest testimony is being given by the witness who did not show up. Secretary Pompeo was invited and strongly urged to come before us, and his refusal to do so shouts loudly that the process for decisionmaking on foreign policy and the outcome of the decisionmaking in this White House is indefensible.

We have a situation where Russia attacks Georgia, the Ukraine, interferes in Syria, interferes in elections in the United States, interferes in Montenegro, occupies eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, and according to Secretary Pompeo, when he speaks, but, of course, not to our committee, has been arming the Taliban for years. So, we have all those facts; plus, good reason to believe that they are providing bounty on our soldiers. And the response from the White House is, let's invite them to the G-8.

There has been another response, recently a Department of Treasury decision, basically—and I will get to this later—that they should have prevented Americans from buying Russian sovereign debt, and they went as light on that as they possibly could under the law.

General Nicholson, in March 2018, you said that you have had weapons brought into your headquarters that you know were given to the Taliban by the Russians. As recently as last week, Russia claims it only supplies weapons to, quote, "legitimate government of Afghanistan." For how long, and in what quantity, or what estimated quantity, have the Russians provided weapons to the Taliban?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you for the question, sir.

We believe there was a modest amount of support. It was designed to gain influence with the Taliban. And to be fair, our inten-

tions were uncertain at that point. When would the U.S. withdraw? When would NATO withdraw? What would be left behind? There would be instability in the region. So, we saw this as an attempt by the Russians to gain influence with the Taliban as part of potentially a post-withdrawal scenario.

However, that should not be misconstrued. These weapons made a difference on the battlefield. They weren't game-changing in a sense, but they did make a difference and they did help inflict higher casualties, and against units that had U.S. advisors.

Mr. SHERMAN. So, we know that Americans have died as a result of Russia providing those weapons. They have just now, apparently, added the additional obscenity of not just giving the weapons to people who want to kill us, but giving them extra money if they actually do.

I would like to focus on Russian sovereign debt and other targeted sanctions. Under existing statute, the Secretary of the Treasury was supposed to choose from a menu of sanctions for other Russian wrongdoing dealing with their sovereign debt. If we completely shut off American involvement in their sovereign debt, we could probably drive up their borrowing cost by half a percentage point. But the Secretary of the Treasury, in the midst of all this, decided to say, well, it is fine for Americans to buy this debt in the secondary market and to buy the debt directly from State-owned enterprises.

Would a ban on any American involvement in Russian sovereign debt be the kind of pain that Putin would feel, and what other economic sanctions do you think are appropriate? I will ask whichever witness wants to respond.

Dr. WALLANDER. I can take that one, sir. One of the most important targets to impose costs on political decisionmakers in Russia is, indeed, the financial sector in general, and sovereign debt is certainly part of the menu where you could increase those costs.

I think that, as an instrument of overall U.S. policy, or U.S. policy up to this instance, that is constructive and smart. I would say, in this instance, though, I would target sanctions in two areas. One, more on the security services, on defense sales, on the kinds of money that Russia makes from sales of defense capabilities abroad, and on financing that supports many of these asymmetric operations; that would target it more directly on those who are responsible for these decisions.

Mr. SHERMAN. If I could interrupt you, obviously, we would like to prevent Russia from selling weapons to India, Turkey, and others, but that is not something we have the sovereign right to do. And as long as the Russian government can borrow money, the fact that particular military complexes cannot borrow the money is fairly irrelevant, in that the money is fungible. Once you lend it to the Russian sovereign, they can certainly lend it or invest it in military operations.

I will point out that we had an amendment in last year's NDAA, which I wrote, to prohibit U.S. purchase of sovereign debt of Russia and its enterprises until they could go a full election cycle without interfering in our elections. That passed the House, but, of course, was stripped out by the Senate. I am hoping that Senators realize

that now is the time to impose some real sanctions on Russia for all of its behaviors, and beginning with this bounty.

And I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

All right. Mr. Chabot of Ohio.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

First of all, there ought to be no question in anybody's mind that Russia and Putin, in particular, are no friend of the United States, and anybody who thinks otherwise is on the wrong path and does not know what they are thinking about or talking about, or anything else. They are not our friend.

General Nicholson, let me go to you with the first question. The reason we went to Afghanistan in the first place was to root out terrorists there and to ensure that they could never use that country to stage attacks against the United States again. Could you give us your current assessment of the strength of the Taliban-Al Qaeda ties, the relationship currently? And then, is there any reason to believe that the Taliban would ever, or will ever, live up to any commitments that they might make?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you for the question, sir.

And I have to caveat this by saying I do not have access to the classified intelligence that I did when I was commander in the time since I have left. However, you have hit the nail on the head. This is why we went there, the idea that it would never be used as a launching pad for attacks against the U.S. That has not happened. So, we have been successful in that sense.

But I am concerned that they have not renounced their ties to Al Qaeda. This is one of the conditions in the agreement. And not only a public renunciation, but a real severing of ties with Al Qaeda. And this was the original reason that brought us there, and, of course, this condition has to be met to have an enduring peace that secures our interests.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

Mr. Brzezinski, I will go to you next, if I can. What does Russia hope to achieve in Afghanistan, especially with respect to us? It would seem that, if they want us to leave, that they should be working to stabilize the country and decrease, not increase, U.S. deaths. Could you talk about Russia's goals, their security interests in Afghanistan currently?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Thank you, sir. Can you hear me?

Mr. CHABOT. Yes, I can hear you fine.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Great.

I think Russian objectives in Afghanistan are the following:

One, there is a bit of a revenge component because, particularly when it comes to the team led by President Putin in Moscow, they are bitter over the Soviet loss in that country that they see was catalyzed by U.S. support to the mujahideen at that time.

Second, I think they want to impose pain to help tie us down, to impose cost, to psychologically break our mental fortitude as an international actor.

And then, three, ultimately, they would like to see us leave, and leave in a way that enables them to develop a relationship with whatever regime or government that would succeed in Afghanistan,

so they can establish a relationship to further their influence in that region.

So, three things: revenge, imposing pain; and tying us down, and, ultimately, getting us out, so that they can enhance their influence over the region.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you.

Mr. Brzezinski, I will stick with you, if I can. It seems like we have been playing defense vis-a-vis the Russians, and the Chinese, for that matter, relative to disinformation and propaganda for way too long, for some time. What would you suggest in terms of a more proactive U.S. policy in this area? And, of course, we are not interested in propaganda. We are interested in getting the truth out there. But how can the U.S. do a better job vis-a-vis both Russia and the Chinese in that sphere?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Information operations have been long a part of U.S. policy. It was our effective management of information operations and engagement, so to speak, public diplomacy, in the cold war that was probably one of the keys to our success. We won economically, we won militarily, but we also won in the information engagement sphere, the public diplomacy sphere.

The cornerstone, the driver of that dimension of our strategy was the United States Information Agency, an agency that we shut down in 1999, at the time when it had, roughly, a \$2 to \$3 billion budget. And at the high point, the USIA I think had over 10,000 people working to get the U.S. perspective out, working to deepen ties, working to support dissidents around the world.

When we shut down the USIA in 1999, we basically disarmed ourselves in the information space and have never really kind of been able to recover from that. So, that is why I believe we ought to reanimate this institution, give it Cabinet-level rank, bring back its bureaucracy, to use that terrible word, and enable us to get back into the game of information operations on the offensive. That is going to be critical because right now we have handicapped ourselves.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. My time has expired, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Gregory Meeks of New York.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Former Secretary of State George Schultz, I am told, would ask outgoing Ambassadors, he would take them to the side and point to the map and ask them, "Where is your country?" And naturally, these outgoing Ambassadors would point to their new host countries. And here, Secretary Schultz would correct them and tell them their country is the United States of America.

So, I am often confounded by the President's actions that directly undermine the interest and security of the American people. This latest intelligence revelation is an alarming pattern by this President. The fact that the Secretary of State Pompeo is not testifying today is yet another alarming pattern of this administration. Congress has an oversight responsibility and duty, and the Secretary of State should be here to answer our questions. And I am glad that our esteemed witnesses are here today.

But it is unfathomable to me that the Russian government continues to be unchecked as it engages in a systemic and aggressive

policy to undermine, dismantle, and disrupt American alliances, threaten our democracy, and allegedly go after our troops. Time and time again, this committee asks, where is the President's loyalty and why does he fail to act? It is outrageous to me that we ask our service men and women to put their lives in danger for our peace and security, and yet, the administration won't believe a credible piece of intelligence putting bounties on their heads.

How was Congress never briefed until the claim was relayed to the press, at great risk to whistleblowers? This failure to act, this unwillingness to brief this committee and others, reflects a continued antagonism and disdain for this body as a coequal branch of government.

The Russian government continues to operate adversarially, and the President continues to show deference to Putin. By the administration's actions and inactions, it is unclear to me how President Trump would answer Secretary Schultz' question today, "Where is your country?"

Let me ask, and I think that I want to ask General Nicholson, Mr. Morell referenced that warfighters often also have access to raw intelligence. Can you describe in your experience how you and warfighters at the tactical level would have handled and acted upon raw intelligence that suggested Russia had put bounties on American troops?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, sir.

Yes, we do have access to that intelligence, and there is a vigorous dialog that goes on at all levels, between commanders, intel officers at different agencies. Multiple times, if I had a question, I would call back to Washington, talk to the heads of the various agencies, and we would compare our perceptions and fill in the blanks. And so, this dialog, very active, is extremely important, and it helped inform me as a commander in the field, so that I could make the best decisions to accomplish the mission and protect my troops.

For example, if there were a threat out there that was identified, even if it was raw intelligence, then you would see commanders in the field, warfighters, take immediate steps to protect their service members, regardless of kind of the validation. Typically, the default would be to act on that intelligence, especially with protective measures. Now, before you might go offensively, you would want more precise, actionable intelligence.

The other thing we would do is immediately elevate it and let people know. So, in the case of the Russian army and funding that went to the Taliban in 2018, one of the ways that we acted on this was to go public. And I did an interview with the British Broadcasting Company in which we talked about what the Russians were doing, the fact that Governors of northern provinces had brought me weapons and said, "These came from Russia," were given by the Russians to the Taliban.

Getting it into the public domain elicits a response. It may just be a denial, but you have got it on the radar screen. They know they are being watched and they know you are pushing back. And so, these kinds of actions are extremely important.

Now, of course, the higher up you go, the more powerful the response is. And so, this is why in my opening comments I said push-

ing back on this kind of behavior at the highest levels is extremely important.

And so, thank you for holding this hearing, because this is one of the ways we make the Russians aware that we are watching.

Mr. MEEKS. I couldn't agree with you more. I see I have only got a few seconds. I wish at the highest level our President of the United States would push back on this Russian aggression, and particularly in regards to the bounties that may have been put on the heads of our men and women in the service.

And I see I am out of time. So, I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Meeks.

We will go to Mr. Perry of Pennsylvania.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the witnesses.

I will start out with Mr. Morell. Mr. Morell, have you seen the intelligence regarding the bounty story?

Mr. MORELL. No, sir.

Mr. PERRY. Okay. How about Mr. Nicholson? Have you seen the intelligence?

General NICHOLSON. No, sir, I have not.

Mr. PERRY. Okay. Thank you.

How about Dr. Wallander? Have you seen the intelligence regarding the statements?

Dr. WALLANDER. No, sir, I have not.

Mr. PERRY. Dr. Wallander, in particular, as I read here from your notes, you have assumed that the published stories are true, is that—I do not want to put words in your mouth, but that is what my notes show me. Is that correct or incorrect?

Dr. WALLANDER. I said that, for the purposes of this hearing, to be able to address and explain what Russia is up to in general, that I would assume that they were true. I would not address the falsity or truths of the public reports.

Mr. PERRY. I mean, I understand for the purposes of the hearing, but you understand there is a bigger story here, and just making the presumption or assumption that they are true (a) not having seen any of the intelligence personally, and (b) understanding that the GRU is, as I am sure you all know, is daily engaged in misinformation; and finally, as you probably know, this is based on very specious reports of human intelligence by individuals that have a motive to provide misinformation to the United States. I just think that that is breathtakingly irresponsible.

But, that having been said, do you think it is appropriate, based on this conjecture, based on just reports from The New York Times that are based on yet even more specious human intelligence by people that aren't very friendly to the United States of America, that this President take action against a strategic adversary? Do any of you think that that would be appropriate?

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you, sir, for your question. To answer it, I would say that, if this were reported in a PDB, that it is certainly appropriate for the leadership of the U.S. Government to decide on a messaging strategy, which is short of what you asked about a broader action strategy. Certainly, a messaging strategy. I would personally start with the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speaking to their counterparts. Because

if the reports are true, the GRU reports to the Russian Minister of Defense. So, I hope that addresses your question. I think that would be the first step. You are absolutely right, actual action would not be warranted based on this sort of report.

Mr. PERRY. Right. I mean, where does, in your mind—and, ladies and gentlemen, the three that I have asked the questions of—where does verification of the intelligence lie in relation to the timeline of when you either take actions or make statements? Where does verification of intelligence lie? Is it as soon as you hear the report, the rumor, the supposition, the claim? Is action required then? Or does verification fall anywhere inside, in between, the time you hear it and the time you take action or make statements?

Mr. MORELL. Congressman, maybe I can answer that question. I think that an administration is required to take action—whatever that action is is obviously part of the policy process—but is required to take action when the intelligence community judges with medium to high confidence that something has happened. And that is why, for me, knowing what that level of confidence is on this judgment is so very important. Because I think if it is low—

Mr. PERRY. Are you saying, Mr. Morell, are you saying that you have information that you can verify or justify that we had medium to high confidence that this is true, this story is true?

Mr. MORELL. No, sir. No, sir. The point I am trying to make is, I do not know what the level of confidence was. But if it was low, then I would be perfectly comfortable with senior policymakers going back to the intelligence community and saying, “We need more information. We need to take a harder look at this. You have got to collect more and figure out whether this is right or not.”

Mr. PERRY. Well, I would agree with you. I would agree with you, Mr. Morell. And before the President or anyone takes actions, I think it is important to verify that. I am just going to quote the chairman of the committee on the death of Soleimani where he said, “The decision to kill Soleimani escalated tensions with Iran and risked plunging us into war.” And I remind everybody on the panel that Soleimani is a target that we had complete and verified intelligence on for many, many years of the deaths of thousands of American service members and maiming of thousands of others of my friends who served in uniform. And the criticism was robust for the President regarding that decision where there was verified, actionable intelligence over a long period of time, and there is none—

Mr. CASTRO. The gentleman’s time is up.

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. There is none with this.

And with that, I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MORELL. Mr. Chairman, may I just add one point?

Mr. CASTRO. Sure, please.

Mr. MORELL. So, I do not want to leave anyone with the impression that I know that the confidence level was low or the confidence level was medium or the confidence level was high. So, I think that is just very important. If it was medium to high, then I think that required action on the part of the President.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

We will now go to Albio Sires of New Jersey. I think you are on mute there. There you go.



Mr. SIREs. Yes, I do not have any questions at this moment. I am just listening. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay. We will go to Mr. Kinzinger of Illinois.

Mr. KINZINGER. All right. Thank you. Let me get on the video here. There we go.

First off, thank you all for being here. I very much appreciate it, all your good work, everything you are doing for the country. This is a really important issue.

I need to say a couple of things upfront. First off, I think it is too much to call this a hoax. Second, though, I think it is too much to say that we absolutely know this happened, and therefore, here should be the penalties. I have read every piece of intelligence, at least offered to me, and in terms of what level of confidence, that is not my expertise; that is up to the intelligence agencies.

And I think the question of whether the President should or shouldn't be briefed, it is really, in my mind, an art and not a science. It is a matter, when do you feel, whether it is the brief or the intelligence experts, that you should brief a President on this? If it is not actionable, is it worth going to him? Well, if I was President, I would want to know, but not every President would or should.

So, I think a lot of the so-called scandal that we have been seeing here is not a scandal at all. I think it is just an art form. And unfortunately, look, this goes to—the prior questioner, Mr. Perry, mentioned about Soleimani. That was a confirmed bad guy that took confirmed action that killed Americans. I operated against him in Iraq, or against his people at least. And there was opposition to that.

And I think with something like this it comes down to political stripes, unfortunately. If you are a Republican, you are going to say this was nothing. If you are a Democrat, you are going to say this is everything. And I just want to get to the bottom of this, because when we jump to conclusions, I do not think we are doing any good for our folks in the field.

But it seems to me that the only thing that Putin responds to is strength. Whenever Putin attempts a new maneuver, he waits to see the international community's response, and particularly the United States. And when nothing happens, he escalates. We have seen it time and again. We have seen it, for instance, in Syria multiple times and everywhere else.

As I have said before, if the intelligence proved that the Russian officials approved of this bounty scheme, the United States and our international partners would need to respond forcefully. But had the administration responded back in February when the intelligence was even less certain, I fully believe my colleagues on the other side of the aisle would be holding a hearing bashing the administration on this.

Mr. Morell, let me just ask you, during your time as CIA Director, would you have recommended—you touched on it—but would you have recommended retaliatory actions against Russia with anything other than high probability? You talked using maybe medium probability. But, when you are discussing the fact that this is Russia, would you on a medium or anything short of high probability?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, I would—so high probability, high confidence to an intelligence analyst is not certainty that something has happened, but you are getting pretty close. Medium to high confidence is pretty good as well.

So, CIA Directors do not make recommendations to Presidents about what they should do. They characterize the intelligence and our confidence in it. So, if it was medium to high, I would tell the President that there is a very good chance that this happened and it is up to you on how you want to respond.

Mr. KINZINGER. Yes, I think this is the key to this. We know that Russia has been meddling in Afghanistan. That is not a question. And I actually would have advocated for action, whatever that looks like, back in 2013 or 2014. It is a bipartisan issue, right? I mean it really is. The issue we are discussing is, was there particularly a bounty, not is Russia involved, not is Russia doing things that could kill Americans, because they have been. And I have been advocating to push back against that for a long time.

Mr. Brzezinski, let me ask you, what other States are supportive of the Taliban and have any of them placed bounties on the U.S. or coalition soldiers?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Sir, let me just add one point on the bounty issue. The fact that it is plausible that these bounties were placed on American soldiers in Afghanistan by Russia is testimony in itself that our policy toward Russia is inadequate in terms of deterring aggression. And so, I want to make that important point. The fact that we are even saying this—

Mr. KINZINGER. Fully agree.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI [continuing]. Underscores the point that we need to recalibrate our posture toward Russia across the whole spectrum.

Mr. KINZINGER. Let me just say I fully agree with you 100 percent and I would echo those comments. But, then, specifically, are there any other States that are doing things like this that we know about?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. I do not have statistics on that, sir.

Mr. KINZINGER. Okay. So, you do not know if Iran or anything is involved in the same kind of situation? Okay.

Let me ask just another question of General Nicholson. During your time commanding U.S.—

Mr. CASTRO. Your time has expired.

Mr. KINZINGER. I'm sorry?

Mr. CASTRO. Your time has expired. Do you have a quick question?

Mr. KINZINGER. Oh, I'm sorry, I did not see a clock up there. I will yield back. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay. Thank you.

We will go to Mr. Connolly of Virginia.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you. Can you hear me, Mr. Chairman?

Mr. CASTRO. Yes, I can hear you.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

And thank you to the panel.

Mr. Morell, on June 30th, the National Security Advisor, Mr. O'Brien, and the White House Press Secretary, Ms. McEnany, said the President had not been briefed on this intelligence due to dis-

agreements among the intelligence community. Is that how intelligence shifts up to the President, that it has got to be in agreement or he does not hear about it?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir, there are often pieces in the President's Daily Brief where one or two or three agencies believe something and another agency has questions about it. And those dissents are expressed in the piece. The reason for the dissents are expressed in the piece, and the reason why those dissents are important to the President are often expressed in the piece. So, they do not need a unanimous view to move forward.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, the explanation they gave does not really pass any kind of real test, based on your own experience?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. That is not how it works?

Mr. MORELL. That is not how it works, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right. So, there is reason to question the credibility coming out of the White House as to whether the President, in fact, got briefed. We know that the President does not like to read things, but that does not mean that it was not available to him. And it is not clear, from my understanding, that he was not briefed. Certainly, the rationale given for why he was not briefed, as you just pointed out, Mr. Morell, does not have credibility. It is just not how the process works.

But I would just say, even from a common-sense point of view, if I were an intelligence person and I saw any kind of intelligence that seemed halfway credible that the Russians had ramped up what they were doing in Afghanistan and were now paying a bounty on American lives to kill them, I am sure as hell I would want to make sure the Commander in Chief knew about that. I would take the risk that he know about that, whether it was small, medium, or high credible, actionable intelligence.

Mr. Brzezinski, I really appreciate what you had to say about Russia. The word that comes to my mind, because Dr. Wallander just said we have to ask the question why would Russia do this, I think that is the pertinent question. And for me—and I want you to react—you said Putin is a risk-taker. I would also say he loves to push, probe, and expand boundaries. He is always checking what the boundaries are.

And when you have a President who says, "I believe Putin over my own intelligence community about Russian interference in the 2016 election," "I am willing to pull out 8,000 troops from Germany because I am angry at Merkel for not coming to the G7 meeting," "In fact, I want to invite Putin to that G7 meeting," and, of course, having withdrawn from critical arms control agreements, and the like, and now calling this intelligence a hoax, it seems to me that, if I were Putin, I would tally all that up and say, "I can operate with impunity with this administration. There are going to be very few consequences for pushing that envelope as far as I can push it." Do you think that is a fair appraisal of where we are in the current relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Sir, I am on track with you on this. I would just characterize Putin not so much as a risk-taker, but someone who has got very clear objectives, is willing to assertively pursue those objectives, but who is also a pragmatist. As Celeste pointed out, as

Dr. Wallander pointed out, he picks his battles carefully. And as you pointed out, he will probe, and if he does not see pushback, he will push further. If he sees forcibly pushback, he will back off.

And that is what is a concern about this immediate issue at hand, which is the bounties issues. Now that it is out in the public domain, now that it is an issue that has gotten the attention it has, it is now incumbent upon the administration to clearly articulate to the Russians this is completely unacceptable.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes, and I would—

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. We need a forceful response, at least rhetorically. And as for more specific elements of a more aggressive or substantive response, that has to be determined based on the intelligence.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And I would add to what you just said, Mr. Brzezinski, conversely, there are consequences for not doing what you just said. When Putin hears equivocation and, well, we did not know and it is not clear, and we did not have actionable intelligence such that we could react at all, I think that gives him a flashing green light to do more of it and to look at other areas where he can do damage to the United States. And I think that is a very dangerous situation our President and this administration have put themselves in.

With that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

We will go to Mr. Zeldin of New York. We cannot hear your audio there, Mr. Zeldin. For some reason, I am not hearing you. Can we come back to you? Okay.

What I am going to do is go to the next Republican, and then, go to a Democrat. All right? So, Mr. Mast of Florida. Mr. Mast, are you there?

[No response.]

Okay. Will the administrator tell me who the next Republican is that we can call on?

Ms. STILES. Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. CASTRO. Mr. Fitzpatrick? Okay.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Can you hear me?

Mr. CASTRO. Yes, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member.

Thank you to the panelists.

And just to echo what my friend Adam Kinzinger had said, I hope that our focus can be on, No. 1, fixing the problem, getting our arms around this intelligence and fixing it. And we always can have time to go back and do an after-action report on what did or did not happen after the fact, after we fix the problem.

So, for the panelists, thank you for being here.

And I just wanted to get your updated sense. I served in Ukraine as an FBI agent. That was my last international assignment. And we were, obviously, very well aware of Mr. Putin's sinister motives when it comes to that region. We all knew that Mr. Putin has geographic dominance aspirations to reconstitute the USSR. Iran has religious dominance aspirations. China has economic dominance aspirations. And in many ways, they were operating—in some ways, I should say—in collaboration with one another.

So, if the panelists could just shed light and maybe provide us with an update on your assessment or your sense for the collaboration going on between Vladimir Putin and Syria, Iran, China, North Korea, and any other actors in the region?

Dr. WALLANDER. I can speak to that, sir. Russia and Iran collaborate militarily in Syria and have for years. The Russian military is not a ground presence in Syria and it relies on, as I suggested earlier, quasi-private military mercenary groups and, also, coordination with other actors, including Iran, in Syria.

Russia strategically coordinates with China in areas where they have common interests in challenging American leadership, whether that is in the U.N. Security Council in trying to prevent U.N. Security Council resolutions, for example, condemning the Assad regime in Syria or many others. They share an interest in trying to revise the global liberal order in order to undermine American leadership.

So, you can find instances in which Russia cooperates with countries in areas that really affect in a negative way American leadership and American allies and our interests.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Do any of the other panelists have anything to add to that?

[No response.]

Okay. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to the ranking member. Thanks for holding this hearing.

And thanks to the extraordinary testimony of our witnesses.

Mr. Morell, I am going to ask you about the reports that there was information in the President's Daily Briefing that the Russians were putting a bounty on the heads of American troops. And we have heard lots of reasons why there was no reason the President should have been concerned about this, should have wanted to be concerned about this. But I just want to ask you, I want to take a step back and have you explain how the President's Daily Brief is assembled. Can you do that for us?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir. So, there is a meeting every morning with the briefers there who just briefed that morning and they provide their feedback on what happened. The most important part of that feedback, are there any additional questions that customers need answers to that would result in a piece the next day? And then, the various parts of the intelligence community propose pieces for the next day and the out days and decisions are made about what is going to be in the book the next day and what is going to be in the book the day after that.

Once those pieces are drafted and approved within the agency that writes them, they are coordinated across the intelligence community. And that is where you can get agreement. So, you can get all agencies agreeing or you can get dissents. You can get DIA and CIA think one thing and NSA thinks something else.

So, that is pretty much how the process works. I would add that within each agency the process for getting a piece approved to be even sent out for coordination is extraordinarily rigorous, because at the end of the day these views are not views of a Michael Morell;

they are the views of the Central Intelligence Agency and the views of the United States intelligence community.

Mr. DEUTCH. How do you react, Mr. Morell, to some of my colleagues coming back now to assert that this information shouldn't have been in there? One of my colleagues said it was not verifiable. One of them said it was biased human intelligence and that, as a result, it should have been clear back in February that this is nothing to be concerned about.

Mr. MORELL. So, if it was in the PDB—and I do not know that it was—but if it was in the PDB, it means at least one agency—one important agency, right?—believed the information to be true at some level of confidence. So, that is the response, right, is that someone in the intelligence community believed that information to be true. And that is why it was in the PDB. It would not be there otherwise.

Mr. DEUTCH. And so, before we even get to the question of low, medium, or high, which we discussed earlier, let's talk about the kind of information that it is. If there were information in the PDB that said that there was a threat against one of our Ambassadors in Europe, and it did not come up in the Daily Brief, at the morning meeting with the President, what would happen then? Would someone raise it with the President?

Mr. MORELL. So, sure. If it is not in the PDB, but the President needs to know it, then the briefer can raise it on their own, right? "This is something else you need to know, Mr. President." Or the DNI, who is sitting there as well, the Director of National Intelligence can raise it and say, "Mr. President, there is something else you need to know." Or the Director of CIA, or anybody else in the room.

I mean, one of the things that people forget here is that the President's briefer is the most junior person in the room. I was once that person. I was the most junior person in the room. Right? So, the National Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, the Vice President, the Director of National Intelligence, Director of CIA are all in the room. Any one of them are capable of saying, "Mr. President, in addition to what is in your book, you also need to know this," or that.

Mr. DEUTCH. Who decides? Does the junior briefer decide what to report to the President?

Mr. MORELL. So, in general, yes. In my case, I went in there every morning with the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet. So, he wanted to know what additional materials I was going to give to the President or share with the President. So, he said yes or no to that. But, in general, the briefers decide.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Morell, I would just close by pointing out that, when one of the agencies says that the Russians are putting a bounty on the heads of American soldiers, that someone in that room, one would think, would care to share that information with the President of the United States. And when this information comes out months later, the response from the President of the United States, out of respect for the families who lost loved ones in Afghanistan, should not immediately come to his own defense, but should try to get to the bottom of what happened. Fixing the problem is not about the PDB; fixing the problem is making sure

that the President is looking out for the protection of our troops and potential Russian efforts, first and foremost. That is what I think needs to be about.

And I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

We are going to go to Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Chairman, for hosting this very important hearing on the absolutely shocking allegations that Russia is paying Taliban-linked militants to attack our service men and women. If these reports are, indeed, true, we must take strong and swift action to show Russia that attacking Americans is never acceptable and will be met with a swift and strong response by the United States of America.

Russia has proven that it will exploit any opportunity to undermine and roll back American influence, even at the cost of destabilizing regions and prolonging bloody conflict. This is evident in its malign involvement in civil wars, unrest, and conflicts in places like Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela. Russia's actions are reprehensible, and I am proud to have supported robust sanctions against the Putin regime.

Dr. Wallander, you noted that reports of an alleged Russian bounty program with the Taliban indicate an escalation in Russia's long-running asymmetric competition with the United States. Does this illuminate any vulnerabilities in our deterrence against Russian asymmetric operations and how can we restore the credibility of our deterrence?

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you very much for your question.

I think that the vulnerability lays in our failure to track Russian activities closely enough and with enough confidence to be able to take counteractions. What do I mean by that? It is exactly by operating in this gray zone that Russia hopes to have the advantages of these operations without suffering the kinds of consequences we have talked about—their exposure, American military commanders taking countermeasures, being called to account by political leadership, potential financial sanctions. I would look at disruptive activities that the United States could undertake to complicate these kinds of operations.

So, we have to get serious about this, not only because of this incident, which I do think, if it is true, is an escalation because it exhibits a willingness to take risk for a direct connection between Russian action and American military fatalities. And it suggests that the constraints of risk aversion that we have referred to earlier might be being lost.

Mrs. WAGNER. Russian military intelligence, or GRU, is behind a string of attempted assassination and coups, frankly, across Europe, including in the Balkans where Russia is seeking to exploit existing divisions to slow or prevent regional countries from integrating into the European Union or NATO. I am deeply concerned that Russia is fueling ethnic divides in the interest of weakening Balkan States. Mr. Brzezinski, how can we work with our NATO partners to prevent the GRU from undermining progress in the Balkans?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Thank you, ma'am.

I would just add on Celeste's point that, if you look back at 2008, how quickly President Putin backed off when he was confronted with the possibility of a direct red-on-blue engagement—that is, when he was confronted with the possibility he might have to shoot at American soldiers—compared to 2018 in Syria and today with the allegations of putting bounties on American soldiers, and in 2018 where Russian paramilitaries actually attacked a U.S. outpost, this shows how Russian aggression, assertiveness, and provocations have escalated. And if we are really going to curb, deter, contain, push back Russia's actions in this area, I think we have to have a much firmer posture across the board. We cannot be willing to invite him or initiating invitations to the G7s. The political isolation has got to be real and sustained. Our economic pressure has to be much harder.

In addition to some of the sanctions that Celeste was talking about, I would seriously consider pulling Russia from SWIFT. Really hammer its financial sector. Yes, this will cause pain and a lot of collateral economic damage on people who shouldn't be held responsible for Putin's actions in Russia, but that is a geopolitical reality. If we really want to shake up Putin, we have to shake his political base, his political stability.

And militarily, we need to be more prepared to push back against Russia. And I am very concerned about our posture in Europe. Although we have made progress in recent years, it is still an inadequate posture to competently deter Russian aggression, particularly in North Central and Eastern Europe.

Mr. CASTRO. Time is up—

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski. I believe my time has expired and I will yield back.

I have several other questions, Mr. Chairman, and I will put them into the record.

Mr. CASTRO. Sure. Yes.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mrs. Wagner.

And just for everybody, please, so that we can get to all the members on the committee, as you are asking questions, if you can glance on the grid at the time as it is coming down.

For the witnesses, I know that you all have a lot to say, and we appreciate your expertise, but if you all can also be mindful of the time, so that we can get to everybody and help everybody ask all questions. All right?

We are going to go to David Cicilline, and then, I am going to try to go back to Mr. Zeldin of New York right after that. David?

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member McCaul, for calling this really important hearing.

I want to begin by saying I disagree with my friend, Mr. Kinzinger, who said, if you are a Republican, this is nothing; if you are a Democrat, this is serious. If you are an American, the idea that there is intelligence that the Russians may have, in fact, been paying a bounty on the heads of our American soldiers is outrageous and demands a whole-of-government response.

But I want to get, first, to this Presidential Daily Brief because some people have suggested that, oh, you know, it can be an innuendo; it could be a rumor. And so, Mr. Morell, I want to ask you,



in order to get into the President's Daily Brief, isn't it a fact that there has to be a sufficient amount of evidence that it is a credible statement of fact? It is sort of the gold standard among the intelligence community? Rumors and innuendos do not make it into the President's Daily Briefing?

Mr. MORELL. So, I would agree with you. I would just change one word. I would change "fact" to "assessment," right? It is an assessment that Putin is providing these bounties, and it may not be a fact, but it has to be credible in order to get in there, yes, sir.

Mr. CICILLINE. Right. So, this idea of just rumors, unsubstantiated rumors do not make it into the Presidential Daily Brief. And I think the President has acknowledged that it was in the President's Daily Brief, or at least he said he did not read, he was not briefed on it, and he did not read it, which presents its own problem. Kind of the consequences of a President who does not read the Daily Brief is, in and of itself, alarming.

But, in addition to that, the National Security Advisor, Mr. O'Brien, acknowledged publicly that he had begun to develop, along with the other appropriate officials, a set of responses to this activity by the Russians, a set of options to present to the President. And is it fair to say that you do not go through the arduous process of developing a set of responses without having some confidence that the intelligence that you have collected is accurate, credible, and worthy of action?

Mr. MORELL. In my experience, yes, sir.

Mr. CICILLINE. Mr. Morell?

Mr. MORELL. I was just going to say, in my experience, sir, yes, you would need credible intelligence in order to start that process.

Mr. CICILLINE. And so, in this context, we have President Trump who has fawned over President Putin. On the campaign trail, he repeatedly complimented Vladimir Putin. He denied that Russia interfered with U.S. elections. In 2017, in an interview with Bill O'Reilly, when he was asked about Putin being a killer, he said, you know, there are a lot of killers; do you think this country is so innocent? And then, in 2018, at the Helsinki Summit, Trump incredibly sided with Putin over our own intelligence community about Russia interfering with our elections. He has withdrawn from the Open Skies Treaty, which benefits Russia. He has proposed reducing U.S. forces in Europe. So, it is in all of that context. Putin has annexed Crimea, remains steadfastly hostile to Ukrainian democracy in violation of international law, and just last week we saw him again, as a dictator, extend his term in office until 2036. So, it is in this context that reporting that the President failed to act or even condemn this action by the Russians is so outrageous.

And so, my first question is to you, Mr. Brzezinski. This, it seems to me, suggests the absence of

[audio malfunction]. The President is not really interested in doing it. But would it, in fact, be helpful if we actually had a strategy to contain Russia when we needed to and to engage with them when we needed to, and what should that look like?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Sir, I missed part of your question, but I understood it is, basically, do we have a strategy for dealing with Russian assertiveness?

Mr. CICILLINE. And should we? Do we have one, should we, and what should it look like?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. I think right now, and unfortunately, I think this is true across the last several Republican and Democratic administrations, we have really had kind of an ad hoc strategy. It has been reactive and it has been incremental. What we really need to be doing is leveraging the full spectrum of power that we have to deal with Russia. And that power includes our economic might. I think we ought to be leveraging more economic sanctions. And think about it, we are a \$17 trillion economy; Russia is somewhere between 1 and 2. We have, with the Europeans, a 34-to-1 advantage in GDP comparison. We ought to be hammering the Russian economy on this if we really want to be serious about convincing Russia to take a different course of action.

On the political side, we can impose more aggressive political sanctions on Russia. And then, also, as I have pointed out, we need to adjust our military posture.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

And, General Nicholson, my last question, if the allegations that are reported in The New York Times are true and Russians placed bounties on the heads of American soldiers, what should the President of the United States do to ensure that service members' families and the American people gain some comfort in knowing that we are doing everything we can to protect the men and women in uniform and to ensure that the Russians know that we will not tolerate this and we take this action very seriously?

General NICHOLSON. Yes, what you just said, sir. We should let the American people know that we will do it, and then, that would be visible by, as I mention in my recommendations, very highest levels of our government, drawing a clear line that this is unacceptable.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. All right.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Zeldin, hopefully, we have got you now. I still cannot hear you. Yes, now it says you are on mute there. Yes, it is not coming through. Yes, sorry about that.

I will go to the next Republican, Mr. Curtis. Mr. Curtis?

[No response.]

How about Burchett? Okay.

Mr. BURCHETT. Can you now hear me?

Mr. CASTRO. Yes. Oh, yes, we can hear you.

Mr. BURCHETT. I hate cutting in front of everybody, especially my colleague Lee Zeldin, who I make him look good on the baseball diamond. I am a consensus fourth stringer on our baseball team, in case you all did not know that.

And it is a pleasure being here with you all, and thank you all. I am very interested in this topic. I have talked about it on the news. I have gotten busted from both sides on it.

And I think it is pretty much known that Putin is a thug. I mean, I am sure he quakes in his Gucci loafers when he hears that the 435th most powerful person in Congress isn't a fan of his, but

I think he is a thug. I do not know why there is any fascination with either side on him.

We know that Russia has been helping the Taliban through political, maybe even material means since 2016. The Russians justify this because of the rise of the Islamic State.

Now the—I am not sure if I say it right—but the Khorasan Province and the ISKP and their view that the Taliban is less of a threat to their security, and my question is this: what do the Russians gain by paying the Taliban to kill our troops if we have a shared enemy in the ISKP? And you all just jump in. Ma'am, why do not you go? Ladies first. I am in the South, so that is—go ahead.

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you, sir. I am happy to address that.

I think the goal of Russian policy now—and General Nicholson pointed to this as well—is to get the United States out. There was a shift about half a decade ago where Russia was ambivalent. It saw some common interests in fighting fundamentalists and extremists, but, after it invaded Ukraine, and the United States took firm action to lead especially Europe in sanctions and isolation, the Russian leadership evaluated that the threat of the United States being nearby militarily, not just NATO in Europe, but in the Middle East and in Central Asia—remember, Russia worked to kick the U.S. out of the air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan as well. That was the goal, to get us out and to benefit from our departure, plain and simple, I think by the period of this incident.

Mr. BURCHETT. For the rest of you all, I would be curious what you have to say.

General NICHOLSON. Yes, I will jump in, sir. General Nicholson here.

I agree with Dr. Wallander. There was a lot of hedging activity, we would call it, I would say, as it was unclear what the United States' intentions were near the end of the Obama Administration. And we had a Stated intention to leave. We did see Pakistanis, Iranians, as well as Russians, all getting involved, I think to gain some influence in what was going to be the environment after we left, after the U.S. and NATO left.

So, I think a part of it was motivated by a desire to gain leverage, and then, another part is their legitimate concern about the spillover of terrorism into Central Asia and Russia. However, this was overStated and this was called their misinformation campaign, suggesting that the United States was supporting ISIS, and, in fact, it was deliberately promoting it.

So, I think there is a combination lens, as with many things, with truth and fiction, as they pursued their overall goal, which is to undermine us, to undermine NATO. They did not want to see us be successful there and they wanted us out of the region.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you.

Mr. MORELL. Congressman, if I could add just one thing, I agree with everything that Dr. Wallander and General Nicholson said. I would just add that this is about Afghanistan, but it is also about outside of Afghanistan. This is about reminding Americans that, wherever you go in the world, it might not be safe. And they want us to think twice about sending troops anywhere. So, this is a pretty broad policy as well as Afghanistan-specific.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. Real quick, I am running out of time, but what can we do to make sure this does not happen again? We can talk all these broad statements, but bottom-line me. I am in east Tennessee; we need to cut to the chase. Ma'am, what do you think bottom line? I have got 40 seconds, so 10 seconds apiece.

Dr. WALLANDER. A political message, but also disruption operations. The GRU can operate like this because it can travel to Europe. It can use international financial institutions. And if it did not have access to those resources, it would not be able to engage in these operations.

Mr. BURCHETT. General?

General NICHOLSON. Sir, I would say, No. 1, strongly and clearly and unequivocally State this is unacceptable. And then, second, the other things that they are interested in, and this is why I suggest suspending any talk of withdrawing troops from Germany.

Mr. BURCHETT. Mr. Morell, I have got 1 second.

Mr. MORELL. Sir, I would say you have to play to Putin's fears. And what he fears is his middle class coming out into the streets of Moscow and saying they want change and they want him to go away. And that is why I agree fully with Mr. Brzezinski that the sanctions need to be broad-based and should not be targeted. They should be broad-based.

Mr. BURCHETT. Great. Thank you all.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate all you all.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

Mr. BURCHETT. And I actually miss you guys in person. I know it is not the same without me being there live. So, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, Ranking Member, as always, it is good seeing you, Brother.

Mr. CASTRO. Ms. Titus?

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank my colleagues and the panel for giving us very detailed discussion about the issue of bounties. But I want to look at this from a bigger picture, as we have started to do. I think Mr. Brzezinski said that our policy over several administrations has been ad hoc and reactive, and we know that. You just go back to Obama. We had the reset with the red button. That was pretty optimistic. People thought we were going to accomplish a lot, but it fizzled pretty fast, and then, ended up with Crimea and sanctions and adoptions being denied and interference in elections.

So now, we have got a new President and a new policy, if you can call it a policy. Nobody has come up with a name for it because it is so confusing. The President talked about Putin in his campaign and praised him, but, then, on the other hand, he said, "I've been more aggressive against Russia than any other President." And then, I think you, Mr. Chairman, laid out all the things that have happened in recent days that show how the President feels about Mr. Putin.

We have heard some grand strategies now for what our policy should be, but I do not see any of those being put into effect by this administration, judging from his recent behavior. But I am optimistic. I think we are going to have a new President here in a few months. So, I would like to talk about what difference that will

make. Will that cause Putin to change his policy, as he deals with the new President? The fact that he is going to be there until 2036, he thinks, will that affect his behavior? How can we now get back into multilateral relationships to change the new reset or a new policy? And how can we more effectively deal with his plausible deniability, like the Wagner Group that he often hides behind? So, given those major changes that I anticipate will come in November, could you kind of address how you think that will affect what our policy toward Russia will be?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. If I could, I will take a stab.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Whether it is a Trump administration or a Biden administration, there are four kind of elements I would have for effecting Russia's strategy.

One is to ratchet up political isolation of the Putin regime, so he does not get legitimacy, political legitimacy, and stature through fora like the G7.

Second, I would enhance our military readiness in key frontiers. I focus most on Central Europe, but that is one area we ought to be continuing to enhance our military readiness, particularly for high-intensity conflict.

Third, as I mentioned several times, we ought to enhance our economic pressure, really impose economic pain on Russia.

And then, fourth, kind of following the point that was inferred by Director Morell and Dr. Wallander, we ought to really think about our own strategy disruption against Russia. In the same way that Putin has been mucking around in our politics and the politics of our allies and partners, we ought to be leveraging his own political weaknesses by leveraging our asymmetric advantages and asymmetric tools like cyber warfare and information operations.

His political stature isn't as strong as he would like it to be. And the more we could create a certain amount of uncertainty within Russia about his own political well-being, the more likely he is going to be focused inward.

So, the combination of this external pressure and a strategy of disruption that affects his internal stability I think is in order for more effective Russia policy.

Ms. TITUS. Dr. Wallander?

Dr. WALLANDER. I would agree with what Mr. Brzezinski said in terms of the focus of the strategy. And I would just observe, also, that if you are going to focus on isolation, greater defense spending, and better planning, especially in Europe, and not only in Europe, and economic pressure, the United States needs to do it in coordination with allies and partners, because, otherwise, it is not effective.

Sanctions escape, it is easier for Russia to do if the United States isn't coordinated with Japan, the other members of the G7, and certainly with Europe, given the importance of the European economy to Russia. So, we need to rebuild those alliances and partnerships, both because they are good for America, but if we want to have an effective strategy for coping with Putin's Russia, we have to do it with those strong allies and partners.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

And, Director Morell, any addition?

Mr. MORELL. Ma'am, just to answer your direct question about Vice President Biden, I think the important thing is that Putin will test him immediately. And the Vice President will need to respond along the lines that all four of us are suggesting in order for Putin to be constrained. And if the Vice President does not respond that way, then Putin will see an open field ahead of him. So, he will test within the first few months a new President.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Ms. Titus.

We are now going to try one more time Mr. Zeldin. I think he has fixed his computer and it may be working for him now.

Mr. ZELDIN. Mr. Chairman, do you have me?

Mr. CASTRO. I do.

Mr. ZELDIN. All right. So, thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

First of all, I would like to State that I view Russia in many ways as an adversary of the United States. Vladimir Putin thinks he is 7 feet tall. If he could have his way, he would put the USSR back together again. That is where I come from.

But, first, I am approaching this from a position of facts. I have been trying over the course of the hearing to follow a bunch of bad assumptions to take the story into different directions and it is unfortunate.

But, first off, before I get into some of that, to followup on the exchange just now, as the question was presented conclusively that Joe Biden was going to get elected in November, and how would that impact his relationship with Vladimir Putin, if we are going to go there, to complete the record, yesterday he released a 110-page agenda, and nowhere in those 110 pages does it mention Russia or terrorism once. It does mention other nations and, obviously, a lot of other priorities. So, to help answer that question of my colleague.

To also help cleanup one thing that Mr. Morell said about declaring the briefer in the room as a junior briefer, this is a 30-year CIA briefer. The woman who briefed the President is a 30-year career staffer.

Next—

Mr. MORELL. Sir?

Mr. ZELDIN. No, thank you. Please, it is my time now. You had your opportunity. So, we will cleanup a few things.

Next, we are following what really was the Susan Rice version in her op-ed in The New York Times. That is that there was compelling evidence, there was a conclusion based on compelling evidence that Russia placed a bounty on U.S. service members and that the President was briefed. Now I do not know, Ms. Wallander, if your assumption that you come into this hearing is following the Susan Rice assumption. I do not know what you might disagree with of what Susan Rice wrote in her op-ed, but having known the rest of the facts and not playing along with story time here at this hearing, there are important facts that should be understood, so we could have a productive conversation.

So, there was a PDB that was given in written form to the President of the United States. In that PDB, there was a concern expressed that is an appropriate topic of this discussion today and this hearing. In it was also a dissent. That 30-year career CIA

briefers shows up at the briefing and chooses not to brief that information because she disagrees with it. So, the President was never told that in the briefing.

Now I am having trouble playing along with ignoring the facts, to call it “a junior briefer” and ignore 30 years of service in the CIA. I have trouble playing along with the reality that there was some kind of a conclusion on this based on compelling evidence that there was not a dissent and the President was told this.

So, with all that being said, with a couple of minutes I have left, first off, General Nicholson, I have a tremendous amount of respect for you. Thank you for your service to our country. We have spent multiple Christmas days in Afghanistan. You have sacrificed a ton for your country, and as you know, I have a tremendous amount of respect for you.

And actually, it has been on those trips with you and your team where I learned a lot about Russian interests in Afghanistan and the way that they meddle with the Taliban, and otherwise. So, I know that you are a subject matter expert on it.

I just want to hear your thoughts on the fact that there was classified information that was leaked to The New York Times and how that impacts the process.

General NICHOLSON. [Audio malfunction.] Having said that, as you know from our conversations there—and thank you for your many visits to the theater and for checking on the troops and the dialog with us—we have been watching the Russians for some time and we are concerned about their behavior. And so, having this hearing, having this conversation, getting this up on the radar screen, I think is a form of pushback on Russian behavior.

And this opportunism that the Russians have demonstrated in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in my experience militarily when we respond and we identify they are trying to exploit an opportunity and we respond effectively, that is one of the ways that we can cause him to look elsewhere, if nothing else, and to dial down on what they are doing.

So, I thank the members for having this hearing and getting this on the screen. They will be watching this and they will know that we are watching them.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Zeldin.

Mr. ZELDIN. I guess

[audio malfunction] does not want to answer the question.

I appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you.

And, Mr. Morell, I know you wanted to say something. Your words were directly addressed. If you want to make a quick response, that would be fine.

Mr. MORELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Zeldin misrepresented my statement. I did not say she was a junior officer. I said she was the most junior officer in the room. That is a very significant difference.

Mr. CASTRO. Okay. Thank you.

All right. We are going to go to Mr. Lieu.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I want to thank all the panelists for being here today.

I think it is very instructive to note what the White House has not denied. The White House has not denied that the CIA assessed that Russia paid bounties to the Taliban to kill U.S. troops. The White House has not denied that the CIA made this assessment with a medium level of confidence. The White House has not denied that this information was included in the President's Daily Brief in February.

The main excuse from the White House is that Donald Trump was not orally briefed on this issue, but that excuse has now gone away because, for at least nearly 2 weeks, the President has seen the news coverage on this issue, first, coming out of The New York Times, and then, being confirmed by The Washington Post, by NBC, by The Wall Street Journal, and multiple other press outlets. And the President has yet to utter a single word condemning Vladimir Putin.

But the President has found time to criticize NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace. The President has found time to play golf on numerous outings. What kind of message does that send to Vladimir Putin?

And I have heard some of the strong comments from my Republican colleagues and I appreciate them, that Russia is not our friend. But those are just empty words if you cannot even condemn Donald Trump for not saying a single thing about Russia placing bounties to kill our troops.

And so, Mr. Morell, I have some questions for you. You had said that, if intelligence had a medium level of confidence or higher that this was happening, you would expect the U.S. in a normal administration would have taken action right now, is that right?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEU. Okay. And I heard some of my Republican colleagues use a word, you know, "verify" or "validate." That is not how intelligence works at all, right? You just have confidence levels. It is nearly impossible to verify or validate a fact. For example, when Obama sent in a strike to kill Osama bin Laden, no one was 100 percent sure that Osama bin Laden was there, isn't that right? You just have confidence levels in intelligence?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir, you never have certainty in intelligence.

Mr. LIEU. And based on numerous non-denials from the White House, it is very clear this is not a hoax. And so, what I want to understand is—and this is for any of the panelists—what kind of message is this sending to Russia and Vladimir Putin when the President of the United States cannot still utter a single word condemning Russia, not just for the bounty program, but just for generally arming the Taliban, right? No one disputes that. And the President cannot even condemn that. So, what kind of message do you think, Panelists, that sends to Russia?

Mr. MORELL. So, I will jump in first here, Congressman. Vladimir Putin, one of his strategic tactics, or one of his tactics, is to divide us as a people, is to have us at each other's throat. So, he must be very pleased with the arguments we are having politically about this issue.

Mr. LIEU. So, let me followup on that. I find it fascinating that so many Republicans are bending over backward to give Russia the benefit of the doubt. I do not understand that. I personally served



on active duty in the United States military. It is very clear that Russia is not our friend and Putin is not our buddy. We should not be giving Russia the benefit of the doubt. We should be giving the CIA the benefit of the doubt.

I also wanted to make another point, which is the Republicans are bringing up, for example, Soleimani and how there is also intelligence about him. Well, yes, and Democrats agreed there was a lot of intelligence on him and that he was a bad guy. That was never the dispute. Intelligence was never the dispute. The dispute was, was there appropriate use-of-force authorization to take him out? I believe there was not. And second, what was going to be the consequences if we did that?

In this case, this is an issue regarding intelligence. The CIA has made this assessment, and the President of the United States still has not been able to condemn Vladimir Putin. I cannot understand that, and for Republicans to remain silent on this, you are rewarding Putin.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. CASTRO. Thank you, Mr. Lieu.

I will now go to Mr. Keating from Massachusetts.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

I have a question for Dr. Wallander, but for the rest of the panel as well. When we look at what we do in response to Russia, we are always, first, looking at sanctions, and certainly sanctions, including individual sanctions, should be explored, particularly with some of the oligarchs, I believe. But the question is this: I would like your comments on how much more effective it is to work in concert with these responses, particularly with our European allies. And just this go-it-alone strategy, when we do get around and the President does get onboard, sometimes reluctantly, to these sanctions—I mean strengthening NATO, working harder and more visibly for Ukraine independence reform, working on energy issues. Financial transparency issues and money laundering issues are important as well. These are the things, we should take an across-the-board approach in terms of reacting to Russia's malign activities. And how important it is to work in concert, I believe. But can you reflect on your experience in the go-it-alone versus an allied approach?

Dr. WALLANDER. Well, thank you very much, sir.

In order to be effective with economic or financial sanctions in the case of Russia, you, the United States, have to coordinate with Europe to be effective for a couple of reasons. One is the volume of trade between Russia and Europe far exceeds that of the United States. U.S. trade with Russia is something like 2 percent of our global trade. So, to have impact, you have to look at Europe.

Second, a lot of Russian financial transactions end or go through Europe. So, if you do not coordinate with Europe on financial, banking, financial institution transactions, there are workarounds that the Russians are very clever. You know, I sometimes say, if they put as much energy into running a real market economy, their economy would be a lot more successful. They are really good at workarounds. And so, to get to do those workarounds without the United States coordinating with Europe, you are just not going to be effective.

And the last point I would like to make is I agree with Mr. Brzezinski that we should be looking at, if you want impactful economic sanctions, that you should be looking at sectoral sanctions. You can only sanction the oligarchs so many times. Many of the oligarchs are actually not politically influential or even close to the Kremlin. So, for impact, sectoral sanctions are important and targeted sanctions on the defense and security elite that is so core to the Putin leadership. If you want to be effective, you need to think in terms of targeting those areas.

Mr. KEATING. And in terms of the Wagner Group, and you look at their activities in Crimea, Syria, now in Libya and parts of Africa, what theaters that we may not be looking at where you would be keeping a watchful eye on the Russians going forward?

Dr. WALLANDER. Going forward, I think we need to look at Central Asia, for many of the reasons General Nicholson pointed to. I think that I am concerned also about that the Russian government can use the Wagner Group for deniable training of some countries in Europe or in the Middle East. And once they are there, they tend to have influence, and then, they tend not to play by the international rules of the game. So, I think beginning to treat the Wagner Group as more quasi than private would strengthen the ability of the United States to counter these kinds of destructive asymmetric operations.

Mr. KEATING. Last, in the hearings we had this week in our subcommittee, they stressed the importance, our witnesses, of not moving away from the option of dealing directly with the Russian people, giving them information. Many of Putin's activities are not well received in Russia. In fact, if they did know the truth, instead of what they are getting, it would become a domestic problem for him. Do you believe that is a very important approach we should take, too?

Dr. WALLANDER. Well, Putin's disapproval ratings have been growing. His approval ratings have been falling as a combination of economic challenges and, also, the challenges of the COVID crisis in Russia. So, there is evidence that Russians do pay attention and do have views of their leadership. And there is also evidence that Russians have, although official media sources inside of Russia are constrained, Russians actually get their information from a wide variety of platforms that are available to them.

Mr. KEATING. My time has elapsed. I am sorry, Doctor. I yield back. But thank you so much for being here with us today—

Dr. WALLANDER. Sure.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. And to all our witnesses.

I yield back.

Ms. STILES. Congressman Malinowski, we can turn to you, sir, if you want to begin chairing.

Mr. MALINOWSKI [presiding]. So, it is Mr. Phillips next.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our witnesses.

I will start with a few obvious truths. One of which is I am terribly disappointed that Secretary Pompeo once again chooses not to be with us, stonewalls our efforts to provide important oversight on some terribly important issues that we and the rest of the world face.

I am terribly disturbed by Vladimir Putin's ongoing provocations and aggression, all with impunity. I am particularly disturbed and disgusted by the possibility that Russians provided bounties to the Taliban to kill American service men and women. I will not try to continue the litigation of whether it is true or not. We have done so.

But I want to turn to a couple of questions. One of which is—perhaps, General Nicholson, if you might begin—is it even possible that the GRU operates independently of Vladimir Putin?

General NICHOLSON. I will give you my perspective, with great respect for Director Morell and Dr. Wallander and Dr. Brzezinski. They understand the Russians extremely well.

My perception, there is an almost feudal set of relationships inside Russia. On one level, you could view it that way. People like to deliver outcomes to the center, to the czar, if you will, or to Putin, that they think he will like, that will curry favor. So, there is a dimension to this where people will act independently on what they think the boss wants and deliver that to him. And so, I think that it is possible that there can be independent actors within this system doing things that others in the system might view as reckless or irresponsible.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, sir.

Do any of our witnesses see it differently?

Dr. WALLANDER. I agree exactly with General Nicholson's analysis. I would point out that the GRU has engaged in multiple operations that have been exposed and they have not been pulled back. And so, from that, I take it that, while those operations may not have been ordered, they may have been about pleasing the boss and about creative implementation of general directives, we, nonetheless, should hold the Russian leadership accountable because, if they did not like it, they did not stop it. So, therefore, they own it.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Well said. I couldn't agree more.

Some of you have spoken, Director Morell, you spoke about Putin's greatest fear is his middle class in Russia turning against him. Mr. Brzezinski, you talked about the need for a strategy of disruption and creating uncertainty. I think we would all agree that, if we intend to do so—and we should—it must be in conjunction with our allies. And I would welcome perspectives from each of you in my remaining time relative to the State of affairs with our allies. Are we in a position right now with our relationships to do so? Do our allies trust us or are those relationships compromised and perhaps presenting a challenge to some cooperation in that respect?

General NICHOLSON. I will jump in here, sir. Having led a 41-nation coalition that was built around the core of NATO, I will tell you, having served in NATO multiple times, it is one of our most important sources of strength in the national security arena. And the protection, if you will, of that cohesion and that strength of the alliance is paramount for our national security. And I know we in uniform took that very seriously. Indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, if you will, especially when it comes to the legitimacy of our actions. It is not just adding up GDPs, adding up military capability, which is significant and gives us enormous

strategic advantage over Russia. It is the legitimacy that comes with having 41 nations together in Afghanistan. That is an important source of strength.

Mr. PHILLIPS. But, sir, if I might ask, would you say that those relationships are less strong than they perhaps were as short as a few years ago?

General NICHOLSON. Well, candidly, as a leader within NATO, I was concerned that some of the comments that we saw and some of the pressure being put on key allies within NATO risks our cohesion. Having said that, it is true that many of our allies have not met their obligation to spend 2 percent of the GDP on their defense, and their readiness has suffered because of it. So, it is not a black-or-white issue. I mean, the allies, given the threat posed by Russia, do need to invest more in their readiness and in their modernization. The way we go about it, though, I think needs to reinforce our cohesion, not

[audio malfunction].

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, sir.

Director Morell, I would welcome your perspective on our allies, our relationships, and whether that has been eroded over the last few years.

Mr. MORELL. Sir, I have had many conversations with foreign officials who I used to deal with, and almost to a person, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia, they are concerned about their relationship with the United States. And they tell me that, because of that, they need to hedge, and that that hedging includes increased conversations with both China and Russia. So, I hear that. I hear that almost constantly.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

I am going to recognize myself at this point. And I wanted to start with, to go back to a pretty basic question to you, Mr. Morell. And that is, what is the standard for including a piece of information in the President's Daily Brief? It is more than just that the information is true or likely true; it has to be important, isn't that the case?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir, it has to be important to the national security of the United States of America.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Right. So, if this information was included in the President's Daily Brief, that would mean that the intelligence community made a judgment that it was important enough for the President.

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Is that a fair assessment?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. And we do not actually know why the intelligence briefer chose not to orally brief. So, any of that is speculative at this point.

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Okay. Now, when something is important and it comes to the White House, but there are gaps in the analysis or potentially differences of opinion about the level of confidence, then one of the things the White House can do is to go back to the intel-

ligence community and ask for a deeper dive. And we know that in this case that did happen, that Mr. Ratcliffe produced a sense-of-the-community memorandum upon being asked by the White House. But what strikes me as odd about that is that it seems as if a White House, if a National Security Advisor felt a real desire to get to the bottom of a piece of information like this, would not he have asked for that deeper dive immediately, in this case several months ago when it was first brought to the attention of the White House?

Mr. MORELL. Sir, I would think so. I do not understand the timing in this case, but, yes, I would think so.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Okay. And are you concerned that the timing might have been related to the media reports rather than to a sense of urgency to get to the bottom of the intelligence?

Mr. MORELL. Sir, I just do not know the timing. So, I cannot answer that.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Understood.

And let's get back to the more important question of the response here. Now we have heard from Secretary Pompeo—and we wish he were here to tell us in person—but we have heard from him that he has raised Russian support for the Taliban on several occasions with his counterpart—I assume Mr. Lavrov—in the Russian government. Ms. Wallander, knowing that, would you say that President Putin would take such expressions of concern seriously if they are only coming from the Secretary of State and they are never coming directly to him from the President of the United States?

Dr. WALLANDER. One of the things that is clear is that the Russian leadership pays close attention to what it is hearing from different senior levels in the U.S. Government, and when they get mixed messages, they use that to their advantage and cherry-pick the messages they want to hear from the messages they do not want to hear. So, I think it does matter that if it is the case—and I do not know if it is the case—that they have not heard a consistent, clear, strong message on concern in this area from several senior leaders of the U.S. Government, they would read into that that they do not need to worry about it and it is not a strong U.S. expression of concern.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. And they do recognize the President speaks for the United States above all others. I mean, we do know—we do not know exactly what was discussed—but we do know, because it has been publicly reported, that President Trump has spoken to President Putin on the phone something like a half dozen times in the last couple of months. That, in and of itself, is a little bit odd or out of the ordinary, would not you say from your experience?

Dr. WALLANDER. The frequency of calls isn't necessarily unusual. President Obama spoke frequently with Vladimir Putin during the escalation in the Ukraine crisis in order to be able to let him know we knew what was happening and what we were planning to do to counter Russian actions. So, the frequency itself might not be. It would depend on what the content of the message was.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Right. But if Pompeo is saying, "I am concerned about what you are doing in Afghanistan," and the President is saying, "I would love to share intelligence with you on counterterrorism. I want to invite you to the G7. I want to have

a good relationship with you, and can you believe this Russia hoax?" and all of that stuff, how seriously do you think Mr. Putin would take any expressions of concern from the State Department?

Dr. WALLANDER. If that were the content of the messages, that would be a very mixed message, and the expressions of concern from the State Department would not rise to the level of serious.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Okay. Thank you so much.

My time is up, and I would like to recognize Mr. Allred. Thank you.

Mr. ALLRED. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I really want to thank our panel for their excellent testimony and your excellent written testimony.

I think that many of my colleagues have covered very ably a lot of the ground that I wanted to discuss, but I want to begin by noting that I have not been privy to the intelligence around this incident. But I agree with Mr. Brzezinski that the fact that bounties are even plausibly in place on American service men and women shows that our policy toward Russia is, at the very least, completely ineffective at deterring their aggression. And we know, as General Nicholson has noted, that the Russians have provided arms and support to the Taliban that have been used against American service members. So, whether we accept this intelligence or not, or whether the President was briefed on this particular instance or not, the President and this administration are clearly on notice as to Russian intentions against us in Afghanistan and certainly may have American blood directly on their hands.

Last November over Thanksgiving, I was in Afghanistan visiting our embassy, Bagram, went to some of our forward-operating bases where our Rangers are training and working with the next generation of Afghani officers. And when I think about those young service members who are working with those young Afghans, and I think of our President repeatedly praising Vladimir Putin, offering ventilators, saying he believes Putin over our intelligence agencies, and, of course, trying to get them readmitted to the G7, among many other things that we could list, it is incomprehensible. And I can find no strategic goal in it. I have no rationale behind it. And so, I am left wondering, what could possibly be motivating these actions?

But my role, and I think our role on this committee, is to try and inform policy and inform our constituents and inform the American people as to what we can do. And while this President may not act, we know that Congress has acted several times during this term to try to take steps, and we were willing to do more.

And so, I do want to ask, what has worked for us in a multilateral and multinational approach in the past to check Russian aggression? What steps have worked, and are those mechanisms still effective? Is it necessary for us to find some other mechanisms? I will ask that to the entire panel, perhaps beginning with Dr. Wallander.

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you for your question.

We do have some evidence of what is effective. In the summer of 2014, when Russia provided surface-to-air missiles to the so-called separatists in Ukraine and that missile was used to shoot down the Malaysian airliner No. 17, it was very quickly exposed

publicly and the Europeans, in coordination with the United States, imposed significant sanctions on the Russian economy. And the Russians both withdrew those capabilities and stopped—they did not stop their intervention, but they stopped the escalation of delivery of equipment that they had been engaged in and pulled it back and went more covert and more deniable. And that affected their operational effectiveness.

And so, they are sensitive to what we do and the costs we impose. Those costs vary by circumstance. I cannot tell you, I cannot lay out a map of what it would be in every circumstance. My colleagues have suggested some. We have talked about some. But I think the important answer for you is that we know that the Kremlin is cost-sensitive and does respond when we are clear and firm in our policies.

Mr. ALLRED. Mr. Morell, do you want to add anything to that?

Mr. MORELL. No, I agree 100 percent.

Mr. ALLRED. Mr. Brzezinski.

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Sir, I would reiterate it this way: when we are committed to our values, that denies opportunity to autocrats like Putin trying to undercut political cohesion, to undercut the cohesion among our allies. It reduces his motivation to kind of push against liberal democracy and replace it with authoritarian nationalism. When we are steadfast in our military resolve, Putin will be more cautious. We have demonstrated that repeatedly. When we are committed to our allies and partners, when we do not abandon them in the field or withdraw our forces from their territories, Putin is less likely to push against them. And if we are steadfast in leveraging our economic power, Putin does not have any capability to match that, but we have to exercise it.

Mr. ALLRED. Well, my time is up, but, General, thank you for your service and I am sorry we did not get a chance for you to weigh in. If you have anything you want to add, perhaps the chairman will allow you a few seconds.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. It is fine, if short. Do you have anything to add, sir?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, Chairman.

I wanted to add that, you know, war is more like a wrestling match than a chess game. And so, while discussions of confidence levels and assessments are going on on the ground, leaders are taking actions immediately to protect our service members and to respond, and to fill in any gaps. If we do not know with confidence, why not? Well, let's try to cover that gap. So, I would say our teammates, our colleagues that are out there on the front lines right now, they are doing everything they can to protect our service members and they are adapting to this.

The one thing I would add on responding is back to the power of the alliance. So, the legitimacy that comes with 41 nations saying, hey, this is unacceptable; you do not threaten the U.S. and its coalition partners on the ground, that does have power and it shouldn't be underestimated.

Thank you for the question, sir.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you. Well said.

I now recognize Mr. Levin of Michigan.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank the ranking member as well for this really important hearing.

And I want to thank all the panelists. We go through a lot of hearings. You all are really outstanding witnesses and I appreciate it.

I want to start with you, Mr. Morell. You said in your testimony that, in your experience, quote, "Even if it was only vaguely clear that the Russians might be paying bounties to Taliban-associated militants for killing American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the U.S. Government, including the President, before the analysts concluded their work." Would you tell us why information like this would have been run up the chains so quickly, even if it was only vaguely clear?

Mr. MORELL. Because of its significance, sir. We are talking about bounties on the heads of American soldiers, and the significant strategic step forward that would suggest for Putin's activities against us.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

Mr. MORELL. I worked with a number of National Security Advisors in my time. I do not think a single one of them would not have told the President this information when the National Security Advisor first heard it, when they first read the raw intelligence.

Mr. LEVIN. And regardless of politics, obviously. We are all patriots, right? I mean, it is just about our country's interests?

Mr. MORELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. And protecting her? Okay.

So, Secretary of Defense Esper is actually testifying before another committee right now, and I understand that he said, and I am quoting, "To the best of my recollection, I have not received a briefing that included the word bounty," end quote. He, then, said that he was briefed on intelligence reports that Russia made, quote, "payments," end quote, to militants.

If this happened during your tenure, is there any chance that this would not have been brought to the Secretary of Defense's attention? And what would the Secretary likely to have done, knowing this, that payments were made in this way to the militants to attack our soldiers?

Mr. MORELL. Two thoughts, sir. One is the Secretary of Defense is a recipient of the PDB. So, if it was in the PDB, the Secretary of Defense should have read it or should have been briefed on it.

Second is the Secretary of Defense has, of all the Cabinet members, the most interest here in making sure that this is run to ground, in making sure that his or her soldiers are well cared for and protected. So, I think they would speak the loudest for something to be done here.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you.

General Nicholson, I want to ask you a question, sir, about—and I do not mean to be naive, but I really do not know—you have led our troops at every level and our coalition partners. When news like this happens, do our troops find out about it, that this idea that there may have been bounties on them and that the President isn't doing anything about it? I mean, do they hear about this?

Mr. BRZEZINSKI. Thank you. Thank you, sir, for asking.



Information that has to do with what we would call force protection is extremely important. It comes right to the top of the list, because casualties, friendly casualties, be they coalition or Americans, are going to affect the political will to sustain the effort. So, there is a military reason you do that. And then, of course, there is the moral obligation you have to all the members of your team to protect them. So, this is critically important.

I think our service members understand that their chain of command, I mean starting with their leaders on the ground, are committed to their protection. And to be honest, studies of military units, and all that, it is usually your nuclear group that is the most important and your immediate. And I think there is no question in the minds of those service members that their immediate group and their leadership, General Miller in Afghanistan, are going to be doing everything they can to ensure their protection.

Mr. LEVIN. Everything they can. And then, if they have a question, if it seems in publicly available information that way up the chain that someone may not be looking out for them, I mean, I just worry about the morale of our troops. It just concerns me. Again, not to do with politics, but just, I mean, they are out there defending our country, for God's sake.

General NICHOLSON. Well, I couldn't agree with you more, sir, in terms of our internal strength and cohesion is one of our greatest sources of strength and effectiveness on the battlefield, and the unwavering commitment. And all of the members, I know all of you have been enormous supporters of our troops in the field. We deeply appreciate that.

So, sure, it does cause some head scratching from time to time when you see things like this happen.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, sir. Thank you, Mr. Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. And thanks for your service.

Thank you. I yield, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Congressman Levin.

And I would now like to recognize the member of our committee who in a past life might have been the person analyzing and briefing this information, Congresswoman Spanberger.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Not to make light—thank you, Mr. Malinowski—of a prior comment, but at the time that I left the agency I was far too junior to have the role of briefing the President of the United States, not to mention I was on the operations side of the house.

[Laughter.]

But I am grateful to all of our witnesses for being here today, for the breadth of information, knowledge, and commitment to service and our Nation that you have demonstrated throughout your careers and continue to demonstrate.

As a Member of Congress, one of my very top priorities is keeping our service members safe. I am personally furious over the allegations that Russia seems to have further endangered our men and women in uniform serving in Afghanistan by putting bounties on their heads with Taliban-linked militants, asking them to target them.

I have been grateful to hear strong denunciations among many of my colleagues during this hearing, but I would urge many of

them to go one step further. I would love to hear them call upon the White House to do the same, to stand up to Russia.

And this gets me to my first question, which I will direct at you, General Nicholson. You have raised concerns about Russia and its support for the Taliban for a number of years. And then, separately, we have seen that President Trump has held off in condemning Putin in a whole variety of ways. He has offered him intelligence. He has publicly sided with him over the intelligence community. He has advocated for Russia to join the G8. He has repeatedly given him praise. And then, most notably, he hasn't issued what I think is an important and necessary step, which is, if this is true, Russia will see the full force and strength of the United States across the board politically, economically, and wherever else that may take us for us to protect our U.S. service members. That is what I would like to see.

But my question for you, General, is, when we see these patterns, and patterns of nefarious behavior by Putin and Russian, but, then, also, patterns in the administration that isn't standing up to escalatory behavior, either directed at our country or other Western allies, what do you think that that portrays to Russia? And what sort of calculation do you anticipate or do you assess that they might be making, given the pattern of behavior that they are put up against?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, ma'am. Thanks for your service and thanks for your focus on this issue.

I do think, clearly, Putin and Russia are targeting the cohesion of NATO. And so, many of the actions they have taken, not just in this regard, are targeted at that. And if they can erode the cohesion of NATO, if they can convince just one member, one voting member, to not invoke Article 5 if they were to threaten an ally, clearly, these are the kinds of scenarios we have spent a lot of time looking at during my multiple assignments in NATO as a flag officer.

So, I do think they are trying to erode the cohesion, and they are doing it in multiple ways, as the other witnesses have spoken about eloquently in terms of the information operations, in particular, and we have seen this in America. So, I do think this is something we need to be concerned about.

And the ways we can reinforce cohesion in NATO are leveraging the system. I will give you a quick example. I do not mean to take up too much time. But when you look at the threats initially to the eastern States of the alliance after the invasion of Ukraine, and the actions that NATO has taken then, it took a little while. It is a large alliance. But we now have alliance troops stationed in the East. We have large exercises in the East. We have a regular rotation of forces to the East. Those nations in the East have improved their readiness and posture, new weapon systems, et cetera.

It tends to take longer in an alliance. Everything is harder in an alliance. But the alliance, at the end of the day, is, in my view, the effective mechanism to respond, if that helps.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you.

And in your testimony, you have noted that mistakes and miscalculations can, in fact, lead to war and they can be particularly dangerous when it comes to our relationship with Russia. What does it tell you, looking at these allegations, that Russia is willing

to risk potentially? And I am going to caveat it heavily like a former intelligence officer would. If these things are true, what would that demonstrate to you that they might be willing to risk, given what some of their goals are, among them, disrupting the cohesion of NATO?

General NICHOLSON. And I will throw in the same caveat on “if this is true,” but I would say, one, it is a miscalculation and a mistake. And so, No. 1, that we would not find out about it. I mean it is clumsy execution. It is poor execution. Their tradecraft was pretty bad if we have received these reports. If they trusted criminal proxies, and those criminal proxies dealt with Taliban criminal proxies, well, they have essentially entrusted the foreign policy of Russia to criminal proxies in Afghanistan. And that was a real miscalculation and very sloppy on their part.

What it would say, though, is that they made a mistake, in my view. So, there was a miscalculation that they could pull this off and a mistake in that they have risked that there are strategic consequences for this essentially tactical action.

And the final point I would make is, when Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings are the lowest they have been in 20 years, do you really want to risk economic sanctions against Russia over something like this? What is the cost-benefit analysis? And that leads me to believe, again, poorly conceived, sloppily executed, if it turns out to be true.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much, General Nicholson. I appreciate your comments.

And I think reflecting back on the patterns of behavior, I think there is an element here that is unfortunate, in that they might have also made the judgment that they would not taste the level of wrath or retaliation that they would face under any other administration that learned of allegations of bounties being put on the heads of U.S. service members.

I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you so much.

And then, finally, I would like to recognize Representative Houlihan for what I believe will be our last round of questions.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thanks, and I do apologize for being late. I was at the hearing that Representative Levin was referring to where Secretary Esper mentioned that he had not heard of bounties, but had heard of payments for the lives of soldiers and sailors.

And I just wanted, for the record, to read the definition of a bounty, which is “a sum paid for killing or capturing a person.” And so, I do not think that we should be getting ourselves caught up in semantics.

I also really want to make sure that I say for the record that, were this intelligence, uncertain as it appears to be, about another malign actor such as North Korea or Iran, we would not be having this conversation about trying to fall over ourselves to explain why this is either not real or actionable intelligence or not something to worry about.

And so, I would love to know, also, from Dr. Wallander or Mr. Morell, if you would not mind just telling me a little bit about what is in it for Russia to offer a bounty on lives of soldiers and sailors? Why would they want to potentially escalate tensions between the

U.S. and Russia? Did they expect to be caught or found out? If you could kind of try and characterize for me, and for others, why would this happen and why is this, in fact, an escalation?

Dr. WALLANDER. Well, thank you for your question. It is a great question, and it cuts to the heart of the discussions about Russia and what it is doing and why it is a threat to the United States.

It is an escalation because it is an act of the Russian, if true, it is an act and a policy of the Russian Ministry of Defense and political leadership to have American soldiers killed. Normally, the United States and Russia seek to deconflict in theaters, like in Syria. Even during the cold war, the Soviet Union and the United States, when they were involved in conflicts in the same region, took great care to not kill one another's soldiers because of the potential escalatory implications. So, that is why it is significant.

Why Russia would want to have American soldiers killed in Afghanistan I still think comes back to wanting to help drive us out, to complicate things. They do not want us there. They do not want NATO there. I know it is more than NATO, General Nicholson, but in the Russian frame it is NATO.

And then, why do it this way? Because they want to exploit the deniability, the asymmetric operations. They want to have the benefit of the action without the costs. And they have been doing this for going on a decade, not at this level of seriousness, but this is part of a pattern that we have seen for quite some time.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you.

I was wondering, Mr. Morell, if you have something to add to that as well.

Mr. MORELL. I was just going to add, to go back for just 1 second to Ms. Spanberger's and General Nicholson's conversation about whether this is in Putin's strategic interests or not, what I think we have seen over a long period of time is Vladimir Putin make decisions that are not in the strategic interests of the Russian State. Over and over again, he has done things that has made it difficult for his country to have any relations with the West, integrate the Russian economy in any way with the European economies. And I think because of his actions, Russia is destined to continue to degrade as a State.

So, he is not thinking about the strategic interests of the Russian State. He is thinking about a very narrow set of interests, about power in the world, being seen as a great power, and being seen as a great leader. It is not about, in his mind, what is in the interest of Russia.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thanks.

And with the last minute of my time, I would like to kind of end with General Nicholson. Your testimony that you gave ended with what I think is very true. You said, "Our long war in Afghanistan will only end at the peace table." So, how do you think that these allegations, if they are true would impact the prospect of U.S. peace with the Taliban?

General NICHOLSON. Thank you, ma'am.

Unfortunately, they have a negative impact because it indicates the Taliban are not acting in good faith. So, the Russians offered, but if the Taliban accepted, if this is validated, then it would indicate that they are acting against the spirit, certainly, and perhaps

even the letter, of the agreement that they signed with the United States a few months ago.

So, I think getting that process on track and having the Taliban deliver on the conditions that they are to have delivered at this point—and that is severing ties with Al Qaeda, that is initiating the dialog with the Afghan government and representatives of the Afghan people—it is a sustained reduction in violence, and that has not happened, either.

So, I think this construct that we have come up with, it is not perfect, but it is the best one we have. It does give us an avenue forward. Like many peace processes, it is kind of, you know, one step forward, two steps back, one step sideways. But I think we need to have the stamina to see it through.

But there is a condition built in that, before we progress to the next level of reductions, they need to meet certain conditions. So, I think if we stick to our agreement and hold the Taliban to it, it gives us our best opportunity to move forward.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, General.

And thank you so much for my time. Apologies again for being tardy, and I yield back.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you so much. Thanks to all the members and our witnesses.

I think this was a very, very interesting and helpful discussion. There is obviously a lot that we do not know. There are some things that we do know, but cannot discuss in a public forum such as this. But I have heard enough to reinforce my concerns about what seems to be just a breakdown in the national security decisionmaking process. I mean, we do know that the President was briefed, but he does not read his briefings. We know that the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor knew about this, but they, too, did not choose to take the initiative to ask the intelligence community to get to the bottom of it.

And while all this was going on, all of the messages that we were sending, certainly from the White House to President Putin, were positive about the relationship, whether the G7 or pulling out of Germany or intelligence-sharing, or all of the other things that we have heard about. That does not strike me as the way any normal administration would react to information like this, even if there was not 100 percent certainty. And all of you, I think, from your different perspectives, have helped to reinforce that conclusion.

So, I am grateful to all of you for your decades of service and for sharing your insights with us today, and to all of the members for their excellent questions.

And with that, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:53 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

**APPENDIX**

**FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), Chairman**

July 9, 2020

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held virtually via Cisco WebEx. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>:

**DATE:** Thursday, July 9, 2020

**TIME:** 1:00 p.m., EDT

**SUBJECT:** Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?

**WITNESS:** Mr. Michael Morell  
Former Acting and Deputy Director  
Central Intelligence Agency

Celeste Wallander, Ph.D.  
Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for  
Russia/Eurasia  
National Security Council

General John W. Nicholson (Ret.)  
Former Commander of U.S. Forces – Afghanistan and NATO's Resolute  
Support Mission  
United States Army

Mr. Ian Brzezinski  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO  
Policy  
U.S. Department of Defense

**By Direction of the Chairman**

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Thursday Date 07/09/2020 Room Cisco WebEx

Starting Time 1:03 p.m. Ending Time 3:56 p.m.

Recesses 0 (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ )

**Presiding Member(s)**

*Representative Joaquin Castro, Vice Chair*  
*Representative Tom Malinowski*

*Check all of the following that apply:*

Open Session ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Stenographic Record ☒

Televised ☒

**TITLE OF HEARING:**

*Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?*

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

*See attached.*

**NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

**HEARING WITNESSES:** Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

*(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*

**STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD:** *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

*SFR - Connolly*

*QFR - Engel, Wagner*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:56 p.m.

  
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## FULL COMMITTEE ATTENDANCE

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
	Eliot L. Engel, NY
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
X	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Joaquin Castro, TX
X	Dina Titus, NV
	Adriano Espaillat, NY
X	Ted Lieu, CA
	Susan Wild, PA
X	Dean Phillips, MN
	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
	David Trone, MD
	Jim Costa, CA
X	Juan Vargas, CA
	Vicente Gonzalez, TX

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Michael T. McCaul, TX
X	Christopher H. Smith, NJ
X	Steve Chabot, OH
	Joe Wilson, SC
X	Scott Perry, PA
	Ted Yoho, FL
X	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Lee Zeldin, NY
	James Sensenbrenner, Jr., WI
X	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
	Francis Rooney, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
X	John Curtis, UT
	Ken Buck, CO
X	Ron Wright, TX
	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Tim Burchett, TN
	Greg Pence, IN
	Steve Watkins, KS
X	Michael Guest, MS



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD****Statement for the Record***Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia*

In late June, reporting emerged that U.S. intelligence officials had concluded in early 2020 that Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, had provided payments to Taliban-linked militants to kill U.S. and NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan. Some reports allege that this intelligence was first shared with the White House in early 2019, and yet the Trump Administration has thus far failed to hold Russia accountable for these actions in any meaningful way. While the White House has claimed that neither the President nor the Vice President were briefed on the intelligence prior to recent reporting – if true – that points to an even bigger problem. Whether President Trump was aware of these allegations and neglected to act upon them, or whether senior Administration officials declined to brief the President on these serious claims, it is clear that this Administration has left a critical national security issue unaddressed.

The allegation that Russia offered and paid bounties to the Taliban to kill American and allied forces in Afghanistan is serious and demands this Administration's full attention. Recent reporting cites U.S. intelligence on banking transfers between the GRU and the Taliban, and an Afghan intermediary that acted as a conduit for Russian payments to Taliban-linked militants. Some intelligence officials believe that these Russian payments may be connected to at least two attacks in which U.S. soldiers were killed in 2019, including an April 2019 suicide bombing outside of Bagram air base that killed three U.S. Marines.

According to the New York Times, who first published the story, this intelligence was included in the President's Daily Brief (PDB) in February 2020. Further reporting indicates that the information was shared with the United Kingdom and discussed at a National Security Council meeting in March 2020; while other reports have said that intelligence officials first shared this information with the White House in early 2019. Given that force protection intelligence is typically disseminated immediately within U.S. intelligence and defense policy circles, even if it is not substantiated by other sources, it is difficult to believe that this information had not crossed the President's desk.

Once this reporting became public, the Administration's response has focused on denials and disparagement, rather than transparency and accountability for Russia's actions. On June 30, 2020, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien and White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the President had not been briefed on the intelligence due to disagreements amongst the intelligence community. Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe criticized the "selective leaking of any classified information." The President himself decried the reporting as a "hoax." Regardless of when the President became aware of these allegations, the fact remains that the Trump Administration has so far done nothing to enhance deterrence of such activities by Russia.

This story, yet again, calls into question Trump's inexplicable bromance with Vladimir Putin and raises legitimate suspicions that the President prioritized his affinity for Russia over the lives of American troops. Such a proposition is unacceptable. It is imperative that we understand what sort of arrangement has taken place between Russia and the Taliban, and that we send a clear message to Russia and the rest of the world that the lives of American and allied troops are not for sale.

## RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUMMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**Questions for the Record from Chairman Eliot L. Engel**  
**Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?**  
**July 9, 2020**

**Question:**

“If you would have received information on Russian bounties on American and Coalition forces, how would you have distributed that information? Would you have shared the information with your warfighters? With coalition partners? What is the impact on operations, and also on Russian action by this information making its way into the public domain?”

**Answer:**

**General Nicholson:** Thank you for the question Chairman Engel and for the opportunity to appear before your committee. As a commander with the responsibility for protecting the lives of our US, Coalition and Afghan partners, I would have taken immediate steps to protect the force, focus US intelligence collection on this threat, and develop plans to destroy or, at a minimum, disrupt the threat to our forces and our mission. Having worked alongside the current commanders for decades, I'm certain they have taken these steps.

Sharing of US intelligence within a coalition is a complicated matter. We would certainly share within US channels to those with the appropriate clearances and those at risk to this threat. Distribution of US intelligence within the Coalition depends on the classification, compartments and bilateral intelligence sharing agreements with each Ally or Coalition partner.

But again, in all cases, commanders are not constrained in taking whatever action they deem necessary to protect US and Coalition lives without referencing specific intelligence. During my tenure in command in Afghanistan, we routinely took actions to protect our coalition forces without revealing the specific threat intelligence which triggered our actions. For example, if we had intelligence about the potential for an insider attack within a particular Afghan unit, we would alert our US/Coalition advisors and take appropriate measures which might involve suspension of advising until the Afghans apprehended any suspect individuals. I would also promptly offer my assessment up both the US and NATO chains of command with specific recommendations to be taken at their level.

The leaking of classified intelligence can be very damaging. If sources and methods are revealed, it can put lives at risk, especially those who provide or collect the intelligence. It can put service members lives at risk because once an adversary knows you're onto them, they will adapt/change their methods and pose a new threat which you may not detect until its too late. Finally, leaking classified info into the public domain can compromise the decision-making process of the chain of command.

Having said that, there is a point where going public may be necessary to deter the threat and protect our troops. It's possible to go public without compromising intelligence. In the case of Russian decision-making, I believe that public discussion of the consequences of their behavior can impact their internal cost-benefit calculus and strengthen the arguments for moderation made

by those Russians who seek a better relationship with the United States. In the case of our operations, going public must be done judiciously, but is sometimes necessary to meet our moral obligation to protect our service members.

**Questions for the Record from Representative Ann Wagner  
Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?  
July 9, 2020**

**Question:**

“Mr. Brzezinski, how is Russia trying to position itself as a significant power player at the expense of the United States in places like Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Venezuela? How should the United States respond to safeguard American and allied interests?”

**Answer:**

**Mr. Brzezinski:** Russia, under the leadership Vladimir Putin, is determined to displace American influence in each of these countries and others around the world as means to enhance Moscow power as a global actor.

Putin has been arming the Taliban in Afghanistan as has been highlighted in recent reports of Russian bounties placed on the lives of American soldiers deployed to that nation.

In Libya, Russia provides rebel commander Khalifa Hifter not only small arms but artillery, air defense systems and, most recently, aircraft. In addition, Putin has deployed Russian mercenaries to support Hifter's forces.

In Venezuela and Syria, Russian supports to these two authoritarian regimes through the deployment of both Russian military forces and mercenaries. In Syria, Russia is complicit in President Assad's deployment of chemical weapons against the Syria people.

How should the United States respond to these and other aspects Putin's increasingly assertive actions around the world?

Washington should continue to seek areas where we can collaborate usefully with Russia, such in the realm of arms control, but time is long overdue for a more robust and comprehensive US response to Russia's provocations and aggressions.

As stated in my testimony, that should include a shift to truly sectoral economic sanctions, particularly against Russia's energy and financial sectors; a return to a larger permanent military presence in Europe, including bases in Poland and the Baltic countries; more restrictive diplomatic engagement so as to deny President Putin and his regime the perception of legitimacy that comes with many international fora (now is absolutely not the time to reconstitute the G-8 with Russia); and, actions to increase our resilience to Russian hybrid warfare, particularly in the realm of information warfare.

**Question:**

“Dr. Wallander, what are Russia’s long-term goals in Afghanistan? Does Russia see primacy in Afghanistan as a key element of its foreign policy, or are its activities with the Taliban opportunistic?”

**Answer:**

**Dr. Wallander:** Thank you for your question. Russia’s policies in Afghanistan are tactically opportunistic but rooted in strategic security interests that are enduring. Russia’s goals in Afghanistan have evolved over the last 2 decades. As one of the countries in Europe/Eurasia most affected by trafficking in illegal drugs – especially heroin – Russia has long sought to prevent the cultivation and export of poppies and heroin products from Afghanistan. Indeed, prior to 9/11, Russia officials quietly and sometimes quite publicly valued Taliban rule, as the Taliban had implemented anti-poppy cultivation policies. Even more important to Russia’s long-term interests has been preventing the use of Afghanistan territory by extremists and violent terrorist organizations, which were exploiting the country’s instability to enable operations and training of groups that sought to commit violent and terrorist acts in the Russian Federation. It was because of this counterterrorism long-term interest that Russia supported U.S. operations against al Qaeda and (by extension) the Taliban government after 9/11. It was also this common interest that led Russia to provide support for coalition operations in Afghanistan, including allowing overflights and transportation routes for coalition sustainment requirements.

However, there was always an ambivalence in Russia’s policies, because at the same time Russia believes that U.S. and NATO military presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan is a step toward U.S. encirclement of the Russian Federation and must be prevented. For example, at the same time that Russia was willing to allow transit of goods to support coalition operations, it worked to convince Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas airbase, which successfully evicted U.S. military presence and thus impaired coalition operations.

In the past decade, the tension between the objectives of counterterrorism and preventing U.S. presence began to tilt more in favor of the latter taking priority, although the counterterrorism interest remains. But given the elevation of Russia’s adversarial relationship with the U.S. after Putin’s return to the Russian presidency in 2012, Russia began to develop its own relationships with the Taliban and forge its own counterterrorism priorities outside of cooperation with the United States. Russian interests still encompass counter-narcotics and counterterrorism, but given the Russian leadership’s assessment that the U.S. and its presence and influence in Russia’s borderlands is the primary threat, it no longer focuses on opportunities to cooperate with the U.S. in a joint approach to Afghanistan, and prioritizes reducing U.S. influence and eliminating U.S. presence.

We should also understand that Russia’s heightened interest in relations with political and military leaders is related to China’s rise and influence in South and Central Asia, including China’s Belt and Road. Russia officials do not publicly or easily articulate it, but the Russian security elite is alarmed by China’s growing influence and presence throughout Eurasia. Even

if/when the U.S. and coalition forces depart Afghanistan, Russia will have to compete for influence in the region, but with China instead.

**Question:**

“General Nicholson, what is the exact nature of Russian support for the Taliban? What is Russia’s relationship with Pakistan and other regional actors?”

**Answer:**

**General Nicholson:** Thanks for the question REP Wagner. My information is somewhat dated as of September 2018 when I relinquished command in Kabul. I would recommend requesting a classified update from the intelligence community especially on the relationship between Pakistan, Iran and Russia and current levels of support to the Taliban.

During my time in command Mar 2016-Sep 2018, there was dialogue between those three nations. I can’t get into specifics which are classified but the intelligence community can share these details.

However, we knew from unclassified sources that the Russians provided small arms, ammunition and funding to local Taliban groups, especially in the northern part of Afghanistan adjacent to the border with Tajikistan. The Taliban wanted anti-aircraft missiles, but the Russians didn’t provide these which is why I concluded that their support was ‘calibrated’. It’s important to note that the Pakistanis and Iranians have provided military and other support to the Taliban for a longer period than the Russians.

My belief is that Russian, Pakistani and Iranian military assistance continues despite the ongoing peace process which Russia, Pakistan and Iran have publicly supported. While I believe these countries desire stability in Afghanistan, they don’t want the US and NATO to get credit for that stability, hence the support to the Taliban. They seek influence within the Taliban and are hedging against an uncertain outcome when the US and NATO depart.