

Conflict over Trump-Russia probe reaches stalemate in Washington

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The House Intelligence Committee investigation of alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections ground to a halt this week, as the Republican chairman cancelled all hearings and meetings, while Democratic members demanded he recuse himself from the probe.

The committee held a nationally televised hearing March 20 at which FBI Director James Comey confirmed for the first time publicly that the agency was investigating both alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government.

That hearing was to be followed by a second, scheduled for Tuesday, March 28, with public testimony from three top officials of the Obama administration—former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, former CIA Director John Brennan and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates.

However, Chairman Devin Nunes, a California Republican, cancelled the hearing March 24 without giving any explanation, saying that he first wanted to hear from Comey and the director of the National Security Agency, Admiral Michael Rogers, in a closed-door setting where they could answer questions they had declined to discuss in public.

There were indications that Nunes was coordinating his actions with the White House, which sent a letter to Yates's attorney, warning him that Yates should not testify about her communications with the White House about then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, whose telephone calls with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak were monitored by US intelligence agencies.

Only hours after Yates's attorney informed the White House that Yates would testify despite attempts to invoke "executive privilege" to gag her, Nunes cancelled the hearing at which she was to appear.

That its purpose was to block the public hearing and

thereby reduce the combined pressure of the media and the Democratic Party on the White House was demonstrated by the fact that Nunes gave no date for the closed-door hearing for Comey and Rogers, which he now claimed was a higher priority.

Nunes also cancelled regularly scheduled meetings of the committee on Monday and Thursday at which members might have questioned his decision, and then revealed that no public hearings would be held until after the congressional recess for Easter, which ends April 25.

Over the past week, the conflict over the Trump-Russia investigation has been dominated by media headlines sparked by the unprecedented action of Nunes, who visited the White House to give Trump a private briefing on intelligence information he had received about the monitoring of communications between Trump transition officials and representatives of foreign governments.

This action was a clear breach of the separation of powers—congressional committees, like that chaired by Nunes, are supposed to exercise oversight of executive branch activities, not report to the executive branch in secret.

The episode became even more questionable when Nunes revealed that he had received the intelligence information about the monitoring of Trump transition communications at an executive office on the White House grounds. This raised the prospect that he was receiving information from the White House and then feeding it back as a "discovery" in a way that would be politically helpful to the president.

Behind the occasionally bizarre details, however, lie major foreign policy disputes within the US ruling elite, with powerful forces, particularly in the military-intelligence apparatus, opposed to Trump's apparently

softer line on Russia—or at least, his shift towards confronting China and Iran first, rather than continuing with the Obama policy of confronting Russia in the Middle East, Ukraine and the Baltic states.

The underlying foreign policy conflict is demonstrated by the line-up within Congress over whether to condemn or support Nunes, which did not break along strictly partisan lines. Senate Republicans who have opposed Trump's foreign policy shift on Russia, such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham, condemned the actions of Nunes as “bizarre” and joined with Democratic calls for his ouster, and for the establishment of an independent commission into the alleged Russian intervention in the US elections.

Meanwhile both the rhetoric from the Democratic Party and the media headlines about supposed ties between Trump aides and Russia became more strident. *USA Today* published a lengthy report Wednesday on alleged ties between the Trump Organization and no fewer than 10 Russian mobsters who the newspaper claimed had invested in Trump properties and businesses.

One Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee, Eric Swallwell, condemned the actions of Nunes as the cover-up of a crime. Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said that Nunes's trip to the White House to meet his intelligence source is “more than suspicious.”

The Senate committee, which is conducting a parallel investigation, announced that it had drawn up a list of 15 to 20 people who would be asked to give sworn testimony about contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian government officials. The witnesses will include Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and a top White House adviser, who met with both the Russian ambassador and a top Russian banker during the transition period.

One of the most right-wing figures in the Republican Party echoed some of the anti-Russian rhetoric of the Democratic attacks on Trump. Former Vice President Richard Cheney, speaking at a business conference in New Delhi, India, on Monday, called Russian intervention in the US elections an “act of war” against the United States.

“There's no question there was a very serious effort made by Mr. Putin and his government, his

organization, to interfere in major ways with our basic fundamental democratic processes,” Cheney told his audience. “In some quarters, that would be considered an act of war. I think it's a kind of conduct and activity we will see going forward. We know he's attempted it previously in other states in the Baltics.”



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