

Untangling Trump and Russia: What we know -- and what we don't

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🕒 Updated 1216 GMT (2016 HKT) March 4, 2017

Story highlights

Several Trump associates have left their positions after coming under scrutiny

Very little of what we know was volunteered by the administration

foremost operators in the US.

(CNN) — Six weeks into his presidency, Donald Trump and a number of top administration officials are again bogged down by questions about his campaign's potential ties to Russia -- and Moscow's alleged role in hacking the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

The last 48 hours have been dominated by a steady stream of new information about previously undisclosed conversations between Trump aides and Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak, a Washington fixture and, according to intelligence sources, one of Moscow's



Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak arrives before US President Donald Trump addresses a joint session of the US Congress on February 28, 2017.

But the White House and Trump, who on Thursday night accused the media of carrying out a "[witch hunt](#)," have been stingy with even the most mundane details. And their attempts to explain -- or explain away -- the news have in many cases only raised new questions.

Here is a rundown of what we know about this increasingly murky affair -- and what is still to be answered:

What we know

1. After months of investigations, US intelligence officials say the Russian government sought to disrupt the 2016 presidential election by hacking and disseminating thousands of emails stolen from the DNC and Clinton campaign.
2. One purpose, they believe, was to damage Clinton. In doing so, the Russians provided a boost to Donald Trump's bid. This was the conclusion of [a declassified US intelligence assessment](#) released in January.



Donald Trump directly addresses Russia 01:01

3. According to the report, another aim was to undermine core political institutions like the Democratic Party and, more broadly, the US electoral system.

Here's where Trump and his team come in:

4. During the 2016 election season, multiple current and former intelligence, law enforcement and administration officials say Russian officials and agents known to the US were in [constant contact](#) with high-level Trump officials.
5. On at least two occasions now, Trump administration officials have been caught either lying or misleading officials about the extent and nature of those conversations.

Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn [was dismissed](#) from his post as national security adviser, admitting he failed to disclose to Vice President Mike Pence that he and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak had discussed sanctions in December.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions claimed in his confirmation hearings that he "did not have communications with the Russians."

But, according to the Department of Justice, Sessions met [twice during the campaign](#) with their ambassador to the US. And as Sen. Al Franken, whose question prompted Sessions' statement, deadpanned to CNN [on Thursday](#), "the ambassador from Russia is a Russian."



Franken: Sessions 'extremely misleading' 01:23

A spokeswoman for Sessions suggested Wednesday night that his response stemmed from a misunderstanding of the question -- that he "was asked during the hearing about communications between Russia and the Trump campaign -- not about meetings he took as a senator and a member of the Armed Services Committee."

6. There were [other meetings](#) by other Trump advisers -- a number of which have only come to light in the past few days.

As first reported in The New Yorker and The New York Times, senior Trump aide and son-in-law Jared Kushner, along with Flynn, [met with Kislyak at Trump Tower](#) in December.

Additionally, national security advisers to the campaign, J.D. Gordon and Carter Page, [also met with Kislyak](#) during the Cleveland convention, as first reported by USA Today.

Gordon confirmed the report to CNN, adding that another national security adviser, Walid Phares, also met with Kislyak, but denied any talk of collusion.

"This is not any different than anything I said publicly and on panels," he said.

Page too said he "never did anything improper."

7. Delegates crafting the GOP platform in Cleveland [did not include language calling for military assistance](#) in Ukraine, which has been caught in a prolonged skirmish with pro-Russian separatists on and inside its eastern border.



The Cold War: Then and now 01:40

8. Paul Manafort, Trump's campaign chairman at the time of the convention, [resigned in late August](#) after questions arose about his ties to Russia, in particular the Kremlin-backed deposed Ukrainian leader Viktor Yanukovich.

Manafort left soon after CNN reported that the [FBI and Justice Department were investigating](#) whether US firms had been used to aid alleged corruption by Yanukovich's political party.

9. None of the people named above have denied these meetings and conversations took place. Several, though, have left their positions after coming under scrutiny.



Sessions [recused himself](#) from any investigation into Trump associates' contacts with Russia on Thursday, less than 24 hours after his meetings were made public. Flynn was fired [for misleading Pence](#). Page's fuzzy role in the campaign eventually dissipated, and Manafort stepped down after questions surrounding his work became a ["distraction."](#)

What we don't know

1. Did Trump, as either a Republican primary or general election candidate, discuss the hacks with any Russian agent or official?

2. If so, did he encourage them -- or seek information about the Democrats and Clinton campaign?

Trump has denied any such contact, but ongoing investigations will likely ask this question.

3. What specific evidence does the intelligence community have that shows, beyond trying to hurt Clinton, that the Russians actively sought to help Trump?

If so, is there evidence that any of these acts were discussed with anyone from the Trump campaign during their contacts with the Russians? It is important to note that no such evidence is publicly available.

The intelligence community made their assessment public, but they have not disclosed the underlying facts that led them to this conclusion.



Trump escalates battle with intel community 02:08

4. Was Trump aware of the numerous meetings and conversations detailed above?

5. After his meetings with the Russian ambassador were made public, Sessions said through a spokeswoman, "I never met with any Russian officials to discuss issues of the campaign."

Is there a distinction between meeting "to discuss" those matters -- that is, with the express intent of reviewing them -- and simply discussing them in the course of a broader meeting?

6. And finally, the fundamental question: Why have administration officials so consistently misled, muddled or stonewalled questions about their interactions with the Russians?

That follows a broader theme: Very little of what we know was volunteered by the administration. In most cases, they have only confirmed, tacitly or without elaboration, new and contradictory information uncovered by the media.



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