

Investigations into Russian hacking of elections to continue after Flynn's exit: Report

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Washington: Despite President Donald Trump firing his National Security Adviser (NSA) Michael Flynn over Russian links, intelligence agencies and the US Congress have said the investigation into Moscow's alleged involvement in the 2016 presidential election will continue.

File pic of Donald Trump and Vladimir Trump

Democrats said an independent investigation was the best way to answer questions about the Trump administration's ties to Russia. But Republican leaders continue to refuse to consider that option and said three congressional investigations underway were enough.

Trump's NSA, Michael Flynn, was fired late Monday. The White House said he misled Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with the Russian ambassador.

This isn't the first time Trump has distanced himself from an adviser in light of relationships with Moscow.

In late August, Paul Manafort resigned as Trump's campaign chairman after disclosures by The Associated Press about his firm's covert lobbying on behalf of Ukraine's former pro-Russia governing political party.

Trump has long held a friendly posture toward the long-time U.S. adversary and has been reluctant to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin, even for Putin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.

"This isn't simply about a change in policy toward Russia, as the administration would like to portray. It's what's behind that change in policy," said California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, one of the congressional bodies investigating.

Under the Obama administration, U.S. intelligence agencies said Russia interfered in the 2016 election with the goal of electing Trump. Trump has acknowledged that Russia hacked Democratic emails but denies it was to help him win.

The New York Times reported late Tuesday that members of Trump's campaign, including Manafort, had repeated contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the year before the election. The U.S. knew about these contacts through phone records and intercepted calls, the Times said.

Reached late Tuesday, Manafort told The Associated Press he has not been interviewed by the FBI about these alleged contacts.

"I have never knowingly spoken to Russian intelligence officers and I have never been involved with anything to do with the Russian government or the Putin administration or any other issues under investigation today," Manafort said.

Officials who spoke with the Times anonymously said they had not yet seen any evidence of the Trump campaign cooperating with the Russians on hacking or other attempts to influence the election.

The investigations and the unusual firing of the national security adviser just 24 days into his job have put Republicans in the awkward position of investigating the leader of their party. The congressional probes are ultimately in the hands of the Republican committee chairmen, and the executive branch's investigation is now overseen by Trump appointees.

Republican leaders focused on the idea that Flynn misled Pence about the nature of his contacts with the Russian ambassador — not on any questioning of the relationship between Flynn and the ambassador. Democrats said a key issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Moscow before Trump's inauguration. Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, said the committee had not yet seen the transcripts of Flynn's calls.

The Justice Department had warned the White House late last month that Flynn could be at risk for blackmail because of contradictions between his public depictions of the calls with the Russian ambassador and what intelligence officials knew about the conversations.

"You cannot have a national security adviser misleading the vice president and others," said Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin.

California Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House intelligence committee, said he was concerned Flynn's rights were violated in the interception of his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

"I'm just shocked that nobody's covering the real crime here," Nunes said. "You have an American citizen who had his phone call recorded and then leaked to the media."

The FBI has wide legal authority to eavesdrop on the conversations of foreign intelligence targets, including diplomats, inside the U.S.

Flynn did not concede any wrongdoing in his resignation letter, saying merely that he "inadvertently briefed the vice president elect and others with incomplete information regarding my phone calls with the Russian ambassador."

While North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said much of the panel's investigation will occur behind closed doors, Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden said he planned to push to make the findings and hearings public.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Trump did not direct Flynn to discuss U.S. sanctions with the Russians. "No, absolutely not," Spicer said.

- With Inputs from AP