

Revue de presse américaine

Ambassade de France aux États-Unis
Service de presse et de communication



Liberté • Égalité • Fraternité
RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

Jeudi 16 février 2017, réalisation : Samuel Tribollet



FRANCE - EUROPE3

Tillerson in Germany on his first trip abroad as U.S. secretary of state	3
Trump's calls for Europe to increase defense spending could force other upheaval.....	3
Defense Secretary Mattis Tells NATO Allies to Spend More, or Else.....	4
U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis Warns NATO Allies on Military Spending.....	5
Jeremy Shapiro : This Is How NATO Ends.....	6
E.U. Parliament Votes to Ratify Canada Trade Deal and Send Trump a Message	7
European Lawmakers Approve Long-Awaited Trade Deal With Canada.....	7
Europe's Tech Sector Shrugs Off Regional Uncertainty	8
Ireland's Prime Minister in Crisis Over Case of Police Whistle-Blower	8

INTERNATIONAL..... 9

Trump steps back from U.S. commitment to two-state Israeli-Palestinian solution (UNE).....	9
Trump, Meeting With Netanyahu, Backs Away From Palestinian State (UNE)	11

Shift on Palestinian State Puts U.S. at Odds With European, Arab Allies.....	11
U.S., Middle East Allies Explore Arab Military Coalition.....	12
Trump Drops Push for Two-State Solution in Mideast (UNE).....	13
Israeli Settlement Sees Friendly Faces in Trump Administration	14
Editorial : Inching Toward a One-State Solution?	14
Editorial : The president makes a dubious shift on Israel.....	15
Editorial : Trump just casually demolished the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.....	15
Victor Davis Hanson : Trump Middle East Policy Must Face Iran, Russia & ISIS	15
Trump takes first step to put his stamp on Mideast peace.....	16
Cease-fire frays in Syria's south as rebels launch new offensive.....	17
Holmas : The Cold War returns to the high seas.....	17
Editorial : Time for Congress to Investigate Mr. Trump's Ties to Russia	18
Kristof : What Did Trump Know, and When Did He Know It?.....	18
Boot : Kremlingate: What did President Trump know and when did he know it?.....	19
North Korean Dictator Ordered Brother Killed, South Korean Spy Chief Says	19
Kim Jong-nam, the Hunted Heir to a Dictator Who Met Death in Exile	20
Killing of Kim Jong Un's Brother Intrigues North Korea's Estranged Ally China	21
Malaysian airport assassination focuses new attention on North Korean leader (UNE).....	22
Editorial : A lesson on UN peacekeeping – from Haiti.....	23

ETATS-UNIS..... 23

Editorial : Is fear the Trump administration's immigration enforcement goal?	23
Editorial : Trump's Immigration Raids Aren't the Problem	24
Editorial : The nation needs answers, not deflections, on Russia and Trump	24

Spies Keep Intelligence From Donald Trump on Leak Concerns (UNE)	25
White House Plans to Have Trump Ally Review Intelligence Agencies (UNE)	26
After Election, Trump's Professed Love for Leaks Quickly Faded (UNE)	27
Begala : The irony of Trump whining about leaks	27
Flynn saga shifts balance of power between president, Congress (UNE)	28
Andrew Puzder Withdraws From Consideration as Labor Secretary (UNE)	29

Editorial : Another Trump Casualty	30
Andy Puzder, Donald Trump's Labor Pick, Withdraws (UNE)	30
Andrew Puzder withdraws labor nomination, throwing White House into more turmoil (UNE)	32
Latest Data Signal Solid Momentum for U.S. Economy (UNE)	33
Dionne : Trump is unfit to serve	34
Henninger : Is This Trump's Watergate?	34
Milbank : Why do smart people in the White House do stupid things? Because Trump tells them to	35

FRANCE - EUROPE

The
Washington
Post

Tillerson in Germany on his first trip abroad as U.S. secretary of state

By Carol Morello

BONN, Germany — Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrived in Germany on Wednesday on his maiden overseas trip as the top diplomat in an administration whose foreign policy overtures are mostly being conducted from the White House.

Tillerson's participation at a meeting of foreign ministers from the Group of 20 major world economies is in some aspects his introductory foray into the world of diplomacy and its practitioners. As chief executive of ExxonMobil, Tillerson negotiated oil deals around the world, but he had never dipped into foreign policy before becoming secretary of state two weeks ago.

He will be in "listening mode" during multilateral meetings on the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, said a senior State Department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity under protocol for briefing reporters on the trip.

Today's Headlines newsletter

The day's most important stories.

Please provide a valid email address.

And it will be Tillerson's first face-to-face meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, at a time when relations between Washington and Moscow are fraught with tension, uncertainty and scandal. Russia plays a

key role in the Syrian war, it is suspected of trying to meddle in the U.S. presidential election, and there is concern over its recent deployment of a cruise missile in violation of a key arms-control treaty.

President Trump has said he wants to get along better with Russia, but the White House says Trump expects Moscow to "return" Crimea to Ukraine after annexing it in 2014. Lavrov's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said Wednesday that Moscow will not even discuss the subject.

Questions about possible ties between the Trump administration and the Kremlin rose anew this week when Michael Flynn resigned as national security adviser after it emerged that he had discussed U.S. sanctions against Moscow with Russia's ambassador before Trump's inauguration.

But lifting sanctions imposed over Ukraine and Crimea is apparently off the table for the time being. The State Department official said Tillerson will raise with Lavrov overlapping interests such as fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, but will insist that Russia stop supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine and live up to other commitments it made in the Minsk agreements.

"The president himself has said that it's too early to talk about lifting sanctions," the official said when

asked whether Tillerson would signal a softer approach to Russia on Ukraine.

Amid concerns among European allies over how rigorously the Trump administration will uphold traditional U.S. commitments, Tillerson also will meet separately with the foreign ministers of Italy and Britain, as well as those of Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Britain has its own concerns with Russia. Prime Minister Theresa May has warned the White House to "beware" of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Kremlin has accused Britain of trying to poison relations between Moscow and Washington.

The tensions bubbling below the surface at the G-20 meeting come at a time when the State Department is still laboring to assert its traditional place as the chief voice for U.S. foreign policy.

But the State Department has been largely silent, in part because it is still trying to fill staff positions and replace many senior political appointees who resigned as is typical when a new administration takes office. After two weeks on the job, Tillerson still lacks a deputy. His personal choice for the No. 2 spot, Elliott Abrams, was rejected by the White House, apparently because Abrams criticized Trump during the presidential campaign.

Tillerson left Washington for Germany on the day Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the White House. The State Department was represented at the meeting by Tom Shannon, the acting deputy, who served in the Obama administration.

In a sign of the unsettled nature of life at Foggy Bottom, Tillerson is being accompanied on the trip by several senior State Department officials who have the word "acting" as part their job titles, including five acting assistant secretaries and an acting spokesman.

The State Department still has not resumed its daily news briefing, an institution for decades and a vital way for the U.S. government to explain foreign policy to Americans and the rest of the world.

And State often has not weighed in with its version of conversations Tillerson has had with foreign counterparts, even when those counterparts have gone on to speak publicly about the substance of their talks, leaving a one-sided narrative with no American counterweight.

It is not clear whether Tillerson, who has not spoken publicly since a speech to employees when he arrived at the State Department on Feb. 2, will make any public comments in Bonn.

The
Washington
Post

Trump's calls for Europe to increase defense spending could force other upheaval

<https://www.facebook.com/michael.birnbaum1>

BRUSSELS — President Trump sent Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to Brussels to press European allies on Wednesday to do something they have long been reluctant to do: open up their wallets on defense in an era of austerity and budget cuts.

The hammer-hard message — a warning from Mattis that allies must significantly increase their defense spending "if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this alliance" — was a harsh threat to countries that have

been struggling with anemic growth and high unemployment.

[Defense Secretary Mattis issues new ultimatum to NATO allies on defense spending]

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Please provide a valid email address.

Europe's defense spending was already increasing before Trump's November victory, but only four NATO member countries apart from the United States meet the alliance's

budget minimums. Now, Europeans have been jolted by Trump's questioning of the basics of U.S. foreign policy since World War II. They are scrambling to do even more, motivated by dueling fears: Many Europeans worry the Trump administration may not rush to their defense if needed. But the prospect of being dependent on an erratic United States for security is also frightening to some policymakers.

Mattis began the Trump administration's push at a Wednesday meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels. On Friday, Mattis will be joined in Munich at a security conference by

Vice President Pence, Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly and more than a dozen members of Congress, many of whom have turned out to reassure U.S. allies that Washington remains committed to them.

But the hammer-heavy pressure to increase defense spending will still be a major challenge for Europe, particularly in a year when elections in the Netherlands, France and - Germany feature insurgent anti-establishment nationalists who, like Trump, question the need for international alliances.

[Trump to meet NATO leaders amid doubts about his commitment to the alliance]

"What has happened is that in Europe we harvested the peace dividend very, very quickly" after the end of the Cold War eliminated the need for large standing armies, said Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former NATO secretary general who led the 2014 effort to secure pledges from NATO members to spend 2 percent of their annual gross domestic product on defense.

Defense spending quickly withered after the breakup of the Soviet Union, as new security threats tended to be addressable through light, quick-moving forces. But capabilities eroded so deeply that the Belgian military was left asking for U.S. hand-me-down flak jackets for its soldiers when it deployed domestically in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in recent years. The problem was even greater on NATO's eastern border, where Russian President Vladimir Putin revived fears of an old-style - European ground war following his 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

"The security insurance has been more expensive because of Mr. Putin's actions in Eastern Europe, so we have to reverse the trend," Rasmussen said.

The United States spends 3.6 percent of its GDP on defense, or \$664 billion annually, the alliance leader in both measures according to NATO figures. Britain, the runner-up in dollar terms, spends \$52 billion, or 2.2 percent. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced Tuesday that Washington's allies in Europe and Canada increased their defense spending by 3.8 percent last year, or

\$10 billion, which is greater than originally expected.

[Europe's leaders gather amid fears Trump is campaigning for their breakup]

But the effort to increase spending even more quickly is running headlong into European Union rules that tightly limit the amount of money governments can borrow to fuel their budgets. Following pallid economic growth and years of - austerity-fueled cutbacks, defense is rarely the first priority for voters.

In France, for example, far-right leader Marine Le Pen has surged to the top of opinion polls ahead of the first round of presidential elections in April by campaigning on a platform of shutting out immigrants, bolstering social spending and holding a referendum on E.U. membership.

Le Pen said this month that she wants to pull out of NATO's integrated military command "so that France is not drawn into wars that are not its own."

Other far-right politicians, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the leaders of the Alternative for Germany party, favor staying in NATO. But their desire for rapprochement with Russia could undermine efforts to bolster European defenses against Kremlin challenges, analysts say.

The spending challenges are stark in a nation like Spain, where the defense budget is less than half the NATO-pledged level, but youth unemployment stands at 42.9 percent. Italy faces similar issues.

A separate difficulty for the Baltics — where Estonia already spends more than NATO's baseline, and Latvia and Lithuania are soon set to

achieve it — is that money devoted to education and health can also be seen as a security investment, given large domestic Russian communities whose loyalties might be stronger if they feel they benefit from their governments. But leaders say that NATO is of such fundamental importance that they will meet those commitments first and address other issues later.

"In Latvia's case, there will be no need to spend money on health and education if your country ceases to exist," said Artis Pabriks, a former Latvian defense minister who is now in the European Parliament.

But even wealthy Germany has lagged on defense spending as its economy has consistently grown in recent years.

That has made it a primary target of U.S. efforts for a spending turnaround. Germany now spends 1.2 percent of its annual economic output, or \$39 billion. To make it to NATO guidelines would require a \$36 billion annual increase.

German leaders have committed to reaching that level by 2024, although many officials say privately that they see it as unrealistic. An increase of that level would require a radical reorientation of the country's complicated relationship with its military. Many Germans grew up shunning the armed forces in the aftermath of World War II.

But senior defense leaders say that major changes are necessary, and German faith in the United States is plummeting so quickly that there may be a prime political window to push for an even faster spending increase. Only 22 percent of Germans say they believe they can trust the United States as a partner, according to a poll released this

month by German public television. That is down from 59 percent in November.

The U.S. demand for more spending "is a fair request," German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said after meeting Mattis last week in Washington. "Everyone has to make a contribution."

[In the home of NATO and the European Union, dismay as Trump takes power]

More broadly, Trump's ascendance has touched off a debate in Europe about whether it should expect American support as a safety net for issues the continent is unable to handle, analysts say.

"At the end of the day it's a question of the level of ambition," said Markus Kaim, a security analyst at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, which advises the German government on policy issues. "The question is: What role do we want to play in the international system?"

Europe is already in the driver's seat in resolving the crisis in Ukraine, where most peace talks have been brokered by Germany and France alongside Russia and Ukraine. On Syria, however, the E.U. is playing only a minimal role, even though the war's consequences have a more direct effect on Europe than on the United States.

"The Europeans are really punching below their weight," said Fabrice Pothier, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council who until last year was a senior NATO official. "There is the need to make a big leap forward."

The New York Times

Defense Secretary Mattis Tells NATO Allies to Spend More, or Else

Helene Cooper

What's more, Mr. Mattis went further than his predecessors in apparently linking American contributions to the alliance to what other countries spend.

"If your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this alliance, each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defense," he said.

Mr. Mattis did not say how the United States might back away from its obligations to NATO members, though there are several steps the Trump administration could take short of refusing to come to the aid of an ally under attack. That would be an abrogation of its treaty responsibilities, but the United

States could reduce the number of American troops stationed in certain European countries or raise the bar for what it considers a military attack.

The United States spends more of its gross domestic product on the military than any other NATO member — 3.61 percent, or \$664 billion in 2016. NATO countries have committed to spending 2 percent of their G.D.P. on the military, but the only other countries that meet that criteria are Britain, Poland, Estonia and Greece.

During his remarks on Wednesday, Mr. Mattis called for the adoption of a plan with fixed dates to make progress toward getting to 2 percent.

For decades, the United States has exhorted its allies to put more money into their military budgets, arguing that if the alliance is called on to defend a member country, the United States would have to shoulder too much of the load. But European governments have different priorities when it comes to military spending than the United States. Iceland, for instance, has no military. And Germany, which since the end of World War II has rejected military force outside self-defense, spends only 1.2 percent of its G.D.P. on the military.

European Union budgetary rules also constrain some NATO countries from increasing their budget deficits.

Martin Stropnický, the Czech Republic's defense minister, said in an interview that Mr. Mattis's speech was not a surprise, and he did not view it as a threat. "He was absolutely calm and humble and modest," Mr. Stropnický said, adding that his government had increased its military spending. But the Czech Republic still spends just over 1 percent of its G.D.P. on its military, according to NATO.

Mr. Trump is expected to visit NATO headquarters in May when the alliance holds its leaders' summit meeting.

This meeting in Brussels was a tough European debut for the Trump administration, as Mr. Mattis also sought to convince NATO allies that the United States still values the

alliance despite the president's persistent critiques.

The latest disclosures, that members of Mr. Trump's 2016 campaign and other confidants had communicated with Russia intelligence officers, and the resignation of Mr. Trump's national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, for misleading statements about his telephone conversation with Russian Ambassador Sergey I. Kislyak, raised allies' anxiety.

Privately and publicly, a number of top NATO officials expressed concern about Russian meddling in elections in Europe and the United States. And they hung on Mr. Mattis's every word on Wednesday, listening for clues to understand what the complex entanglements between Trump administration officials and Russian intelligence officers might mean for the trans-Atlantic alliance as it tries to confront a menacing and more aggressive Moscow.

Mr. Mattis sought to persuade the United States' allies that nothing has changed when it comes to countering President Vladimir V. Putin and Russia. He said Mr. Flynn's exit over his communications

with Russia's ambassador would not change his message to NATO. "Frankly this has no impact," he said aboard his flight to Brussels. "No effect at all."

But Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the Dutch minister of defense, was pointed. "There's no such thing as business as usual with Russia," she said on Wednesday before the meeting.

One NATO official characterized the mood in the heavily fortified compound as tense and said allies were waiting to see if the message Mr. Mattis presented on Wednesday differed in tone from what Mr. Trump has said.

In one important way, the defense secretary amplified the president's previous statements. Though Mr. Mattis acknowledged "concern in European capitals about America's commitment to NATO and the security of Europe," he said allies must do more to reach their commitments to spend 2 percent of their G.D.P. on their militaries. "No longer can the American taxpayer carry a disproportionate share of the defense of western values," he said.

Mr. Mattis also struck an assertive tone on Russia, saying the 2014

annexation of Crimea dashed any hopes that NATO could have a real partnership with Russia.

"Events of 2014 were sobering," he said in opening remarks made alongside the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg. He added, "As President Trump has stated, he has strong support for NATO."

But many officials here remained unconvinced, privately citing Mr. Trump's previous statements calling the alliance "obsolete" and complaining that it had not "bothered" about terrorism. Last year, he suggested that American support for members of the alliance might be conditional on whether those members paid their financial share.

Mr. Trump's remarks have deeply rattled NATO's Eastern European members in particular. But his comments may have spurred a new focus on the alliance's spending. "The U.S. has made clear that we need more defense spending and fairer burden-sharing," Mr. Stoltenberg said on Wednesday. He pointed to numbers released a day earlier that showed that military spending among European NATO countries and Canada had

increased 3.8 percent in 2016 — around \$10 billion.

"This is significant, but not enough," Mr. Stoltenberg said. "We have to continue to increase military spending across Europe and Canada."

Separately, Mr. Stoltenberg expressed concern over news that Russia had deployed a new cruise missile that American officials say violates a landmark arms control treaty. The ground-launched cruise missile is one that the Obama administration said in 2014 had been tested in violation of a 1987 treaty that bans American and Russian intermediate-range missiles based on land.

The Obama administration tried to persuade the Russians to correct the violation while the missile was still in the test phase, but instead, the Russians have moved ahead with the system, deploying a fully operational unit. "Any noncompliance of Russia with the I.N.F. treaty would be a serious concern for the alliance," Mr. Stoltenberg said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis Warns NATO Allies on Military Spending

Julian E. Barnes and Gordon Lubold

Updated Feb. 15, 2017 2:52 p.m. ET

BRUSSELS—U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis warned allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that they need to adopt plans to raise their military spending or risk seeing America "moderate its commitment to the alliance."

His speech, to a gathering of defense ministers on Wednesday, was a stark reminder of President Donald Trump's threat during the presidential campaign that U.S. support for allies could be conditional on countries contributing their fair share.

Mr. Mattis, a former top allied commander, also reaffirmed American support for the alliance, calling it essential to security and saying the U.S. would "meet its responsibilities." The strong embrace of NATO was a message allies have been awaiting from the Trump administration.

Still, his speech stressed that allies must share the defense burden. Mr. Mattis told his counterparts that countries that don't meet NATO's military spending recommendation of 2% of gross domestic product should adopt plans to do so.

"No longer can the American taxpayer carry a disproportionate share of the defense of Western values," Mr. Mattis said. "Americans cannot care more for your children's future security than you do."

Mr. Mattis portrayed a security environment threatened by terrorism and by Russia's military buildup and actions in Ukraine.

"Disregard for military readiness demonstrates a lack of respect for ourselves, for our alliance, and for the freedoms we inherited, which are now clearly threatened," he said.

Allied ministers reacted positively to Mr. Mattis's remarks, focusing on his praise for the alliance more than on his warning that the U.S. could moderate its support, according to officials. Several allies, expecting the U.S. push for spending plans, outlined their own efforts to put in place milestones to move toward the NATO standard.

Inside the meeting, officials said German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen backed the push and said her country would increase its spending. "The U.S. is right," she said. Ms. von der Leyen is set to announce plans for a German defense-spending increase later this week at the Munich Security

Conference, which Mr. Mattis and Vice President Mike Pence will attend.

Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the Dutch defense minister, said she supported Mr. Mattis's call for more military spending, adding that better burden-sharing should be attached to specific goals.

"He made it very clear that it's not just waiting until the cows come home, but that we have to act immediately and that we should set milestones and a plan," she said.

But focusing only on whether a nation spends 2% of its GDP oversimplifies the issue, Ms. Hennis-Plasschaert said. Countries may meet that requirement but still not keep their forces ready or contribute to NATO capacity overall, she said.

"Trans-Atlantic cooperation is about much more than just a simple calculation of who's paying what," she said.

The Netherlands contributes a little more than 1% of its GDP to its defense, or about \$9 billion a year. That is down from the \$12 billion it spent on defense in 2009, but up from 2015, according to data provided by NATO.

According to NATO calculations, the U.S. spent an estimated 3.61% of its GDP on the military last year, and four European nations—Greece, the U.K., Estonia and Poland—currently meet the 2% target. In Wednesday's meeting, the U.K. called on countries that aren't doing so to commit to annual increases in military spending.

U.K. Defense Secretary Michael Fallon said Mr. Mattis's speech had left "no uncertainty" that the U.S. was 100% behind the alliance. "He has repeated his administration's very clear commitment to the NATO alliance," Mr. Fallon said.

Mr. Fallon said U.S. impatience is growing because officials have been saying the burden must be equalized for years but it "still hasn't happened." While allies agreed to the 2% spending goal two years ago, he added, 19 countries still don't allocate even 1.5% of GDP to military spending.

Mr. Mattis's visit to alliance headquarters in Brussels came amid turmoil in Washington over the resignation of Michael Flynn as Mr. Trump's national security adviser.

Diplomats and officials taking part in the meeting avoided commenting on Mr. Flynn, but the sense of disarray

in the U.S. capital has caused concern in Brussels about White House policy on key issues like Russia.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg brushed off questions about the appearance of chaos around the Trump administration. "The United States will remain committed to the trans-Atlantic partnership," he said.

Mr. Mattis served as a top alliance commander as a Marine four-star general, and in his speech he called NATO "his second home." He also said the alliance was a "fundamental bedrock" for U.S. security, a view he said Mr. Trump shares.

Before Wednesday's gathering, diplomats and officials here said they expected Mr. Mattis to repair the damage caused by the U.S. election campaign and Mr. Trump's earlier comments that NATO is obsolete.

While Mr. Mattis focused his remarks on the need for the alliance to adapt, he noted to the relief of many diplomats here that NATO had stepped up its pace of change after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

"I do have confidence that we will prove, once again, we can react to the changing circumstances. We have done so in the past. There is every reason for confidence that we will move out purposively again," he said.

Mr. Stoltenberg and alliance defense ministers intended to use Wednesday's meeting to showcase what NATO is doing to bolster its defenses on its eastern flank to deter any possible military move by Russia and to improve the fight against terrorism through better training and intelligence analysis.

The alliance will create a new hub at the alliance command in Naples to strengthen intelligence analysis about threats in North Africa and the Middle East. While allies are enthusiastic about expanding NATO's training efforts, there is no consensus in the alliance that it should take on a combat role in fighting extremism in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere.

"So far, nobody is talking about major military combat deployments," said a European diplomat. "There is a trend to doing more in terms of capacity building. Intelligence-sharing is another area."

Mr. Mattis's remarks at NATO engendered a debate over whether he had delivered a warning or a threat, but no doubt about the expectations. "The message from here is that we have to do this," said Claus Hjort Frederiksen, the Danish defense minister. "There is no way around it. We have to increase our defense budget. It's clear from what has now been put on the table by the Americans and the weight they carry."



Jeremy Shapiro : This Is How NATO Ends

SEPTEMBER 2020 — NATO began gloriously 71 years ago with the signing of the Washington Treaty by the august representatives of 12 nations committed to defend each other in perpetuity. It ended ignominiously last Thursday with the padlocking of the gate at NATO's Brussels headquarters by a Flemish security guard named Karel van Aachen.

Technically, the organization still exists. The treaty is still in force; the 28 members of the alliance are still pledged, in theory, to defend each other against aggression; think tank conferences continue to endlessly debate "whither NATO" in ornate assembly halls; Georgia still publicly holds to its ambition of joining the alliance in some distant future.

But long before NATO Secretary-General Gerhard Schröder abandoned his nearly empty HQ last month, it was clear to all observers that, over the course of just a few years, NATO had gone from the strongest and most successful alliance in history to an empty shell and an irrelevance. It was destroyed not by Russian armies but by a lack of interest from its members. The story of NATO's demise demonstrates that sometimes alliances end not with a bang but with a whimper.

The long whimper

In NATO's case, the long whimper of its demise began with the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump in January 2017. Throughout the endless 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had railed against American allies that he felt did not carry the burden of their own defense. He hinted darkly that as president he would not defend allies that did not pay their share. His praise of Russian

President Vladimir Putin further stoked fears in Eastern Europe that he would abandon them to Russia's tender mercies.

Once he became president, Trump's attitude toward Europe and NATO became just as erratic as his ramshackle presidential campaign. He appointed cabinet secretaries who praised NATO in their confirmation hearings. He allowed visiting British Prime Minister Theresa May to assert that he "supported NATO 100 percent." Then, just as suddenly, he would veer back toward bashing allies, calling NATO obsolete, or attacking the EU as a German plot.

Each new tirade would be followed by a new round of tumult in the press and hand-wringing on the part of Europeans. And yet little changed on the ground. U.S. forces remained in Europe, U.S. planes took part in patrolling the skies over the Baltics, and U.S. soldiers still participated in NATO military exercises. Beneath the headlines, NATO quietly remained, on paper, the most powerful military alliance in the world.

At first, far from breaking the alliance, Trump's threats even appeared to motivate Europeans in a way that the blandishments of previous presidents had not managed. European defense spending crept up toward their commitment of 2 percent of GDP, and Europeans established new mechanisms for defense cooperation within the post-Brexit EU. At Trump's insistence, NATO proclaimed that counterterrorism was its primary mission and embarked on multiple studies to explore how NATO might fulfill its new purpose.

In the end, NATO's new mission did not shift much in the way of

resources; the alliance simply stopped talking about its previous core mission of defending Europe from Russian aggression. But these cosmetic changes allowed President Trump to claim that he had succeeded in adapting the alliance to his "America First" philosophy. In a famous speech delivered in front of the Las Vegas facsimile of the Eiffel Tower, he proclaimed that "now, instead of America working for NATO, NATO works for America." Trump no longer thought that NATO was obsolete. To the contrary, it became for him a symbol of how he could restructure American alliances to serve American purposes.

Rotten to the corps

But beyond the symbolism, it was not really clear that NATO worked for anyone anymore.

When Russia stepped up its proxy war in Ukraine in mid-2017, NATO debated a response, but with U.S. energies focused on building a wall on the country's southern border, it failed to find any consensus for new sanctions or for reinforcing existing deployments in the east. Poland, France, and Germany decided that the EU's new Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism for defense was more fit for this purpose. Along with most of their European partners, they began using it to supply weapons and training to the Ukrainian government. Officially, NATO declared its neutrality. Russian propaganda pivoted away from denouncing the United States and NATO and toward excoriating Germany and the EU.

In early 2018, the Egyptian economy went into free-fall, and the government collapsed. As disorder reigned in Cairo, hundreds of thousands of refugees began appearing on the shores of Greece

and Italy. Once again, NATO considered action — in this case, a naval mission to intercept and return the refugee boats, seen as both a humanitarian and protective measure, similar to the missions it conducted in the Mediterranean in 2016. But this time, Eastern European members, stung by NATO's neutrality in Ukraine, opposed the alliance's participation in the effort. The United States, embroiled in a scandal over Roger Ailes's purchase of the *New York Times* at an IRS tax auction, did not take a side, and in the end NATO did nothing.

Then, in January 2019, in response to the U.S. decision to search Iranian shipping boats in the Persian Gulf for weapons shipments, Tehran staged a coup in Baghdad. The Iranian puppet regime ordered U.S. forces out of Iraq while combined Iraqi-Iranian forces attacked Turkish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan and began arming the Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Turkey, supported by the Trump administration, asked NATO to invoke its sacred Article V — that is, to declare Iran's actions as aggression against a NATO member and come to Turkey's aid.

Most of the European members of NATO, including France, Germany, Poland, and Italy, flatly refused. Interestingly, these countries had met their 2 percent defense commitment and even endorsed the NATO turn to counterterrorism. But they refused to use their newfound defense muscle to oppose what the United States and Turkey saw as Iranian "terrorism" in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey.

NATO's refusal to respond to an Article V request triggered the resignation of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

In his resignation letter, Stoltenberg noted that there was little reason to continue running an organization that could not or would not respond to its members' needs.

In his resignation letter, Stoltenberg noted that there was little reason to continue running an organization that could not or would not respond to its members' needs.

Many in Europe agreed that NATO's time had passed, but the United States and Britain were not ready to give up. With support from Germany's Social Democratic-led grand coalition government, they found in former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder a compromise candidate for secretary-general to take up the challenge of redefining NATO for a new age, though just what that meant was left unclear. The Russians welcomed his appointment and declared that they no longer opposed NATO membership for Montenegro and even Serbia. They further said they would consider joining the alliance eventually, an announcement that the Trump administration publicly praised.

Russian support, however, did not help Schröder reverse the decline. Most European members, outraged by NATO's good relationship with their enemy in Ukraine, sent their scarce staff officers to EU commands. U.S. attention was absorbed by Eric Trump's trial on charges of insider trading and the Turkish-Iranian war. U.S. officials often didn't show up to NATO meetings, and large-scale NATO military exercises just stopped happening. Most countries quietly ceased to even contribute to NATO's common budget, diverting the funds to their unilateral immigration patrols in the Mediterranean or military training in Ukraine.

Struggling even to keep the lights on, Schröder got U.S. and Russian support in 2020 to relocate NATO HQ to a former military base in Bulgaria in what he hoped would eventually be the geographic center of the alliance. Europeans did not object, but most of NATO's staff did not even bother to follow him there.

It's the solidarity, stupid

In retrospect, it is clear why NATO faded away. For decades, NATO members had focused on what divided them. They had argued mightily over burden sharing and how to respond to Russian aggression or to disorder in North Africa. These were immensely important issues, but the disputes distracted attention from what made NATO special: the deep commitment of its members to each other's security. Of course, NATO members did not always agree on what the organization's priorities should be, but NATO as a whole took seriously the threats that each individual member saw to their national security.

As a result, in most of its 70 years, NATO, far from being obsolete, had been the tool that U.S. and European policymakers turned to in crisis after crisis. In the Cold War, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in Libya, and elsewhere, U.S. presidents and European leaders had found that NATO provided not just military capacity but also a mechanism for rallying allies and securing broader legitimacy for their

own defense priorities. NATO worked because its members believed that their partners had their back. Solidarity was at its heart.

It is easy to see now that President Trump solved NATO's burden-sharing dilemma — by destroying its solidarity. In putting America first, and failing to pay attention to their problems, he got his allies to pay more, but he also guaranteed that they would care less. A NATO that was built to work primarily for America no longer worked at all. And so America's European allies are not with it in its current struggle with Iran, just as America is not with them in Ukraine.

Looking back at NATO's years of achievements, this seems a shame. But absorbed as we are with the new world disorder, nobody seems to care. Van Aachen, the security guard who closed NATO headquarters, was asked recently what he did with the key to the formerly glorious building. "I think it's at home in my top drawer," he admitted. "Nobody asked me for it."

**The
New York
Times**

E.U. Parliament Votes to Ratify Canada Trade Deal and Send Trump a Message

James Kanter

STRASBOURG, France — A landmark trade deal between the European Union and Canada cleared a crucial hurdle on Wednesday, a move that proponents said served as a counterweight to protectionist policies advocated by President Trump.

The ratification of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement by the European Parliament comes after seven years of tortuous negotiations, aiming to cut many tariffs on industrial goods as well as on farm and food items, and open up the services sector in areas like cargo shipping, telecommunications and financial services.

But beyond the economics of the deal, the vote also carried, for its backers, an implicit message to the Trump administration.

"We want to make clear in this vote that we don't want to build walls, we want to build bridges," said Manfred Weber, a prominent member of the European Parliament from Germany. Mr. Weber had urged completion of the deal, arguing that Europe needed to forge ahead as a

commercial power in the face of headwinds from its longtime ally, the United States.

Trade policy has pitted mainstream politicians who say modern deals do much to bolster prosperity while checking unbridled globalization against those — many from parties on the extreme right and left — who warn that such deals relinquish national sovereignty and hand multinational companies too much power.

Lawmakers at the European Parliament comfortably approved the deal in an occasionally rowdy session by 408 votes to 254, but environmental campaigners and hard-left groups were among those holding noisy rallies outside the legislature's glass and steel building.

The relative success in ratifying the deal, after some prominent delays — including one instance in which a Belgian regional parliament appeared to have torpedoed the entire agreement — nevertheless contrasts sharply with the failure to agree on a mooted trans-Atlantic trade deal between the European Union and the United States.

The vote on Wednesday was not, however, the final stage approval.

The deal must be ratified by national and some regional parliaments across the European Union, which could create further hurdles before it goes into force.

Still, senior officials from the European Union and Canada expressed relief that the vote passed.

"The world was waiting for a strong voice from Europe and Canada, and today, Europe has spoken with a strong voice for open and progressive trade," François-Philippe Champagne, the Canadian minister for international trade, told a news conference in Strasbourg.

For their part, Canadians were making "steady progress" toward ratification of the deal, said Mr. Champagne, who spoke in a combination of English, French and Italian to underline his country's close ties with Europe. Those ties should be further reinforced on Thursday, when Justin Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister, is scheduled to address the Parliament.

Cecilia Malmstrom, the European trade commissioner, told the same news conference that Europe was preparing deals with more than a

dozen other countries including Mexico, which is embroiled in battles over trade with the Trump administration. Mexico is an "important friend and ally," she said.

The Canada deal was nearly derailed last year by Wallonia, a French-speaking region of Belgium, which used its veto to temporarily withhold the Belgian government's approval of the deal.

That Walloon protest reflected how globalization has fallen out of favor with many citizens in the West, but it also raised questions about whether the European Union had become hobbled by such wide differences between, and within, its 28 member states that it would no longer be able to make international trade deals.

Ahead of the vote, protesters lay down in front of the entrance to the Parliament in subzero temperatures, obliging visitors and staff members to clamber over their bodies. Greenpeace, an environmental group, partially submerged a statue of Lady Justice in a river running around the European Parliament, displaying banners reading "Sink CETA, not justice."

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

European Lawmakers Approve Long-Awaited Trade Deal With Canada

Emre Peker

Feb. 15, 2017 8:43 a.m. ET

BRUSSELS—European Union lawmakers approved a preferential trade deal with Canada on Wednesday, seeking to bolster tepid economic growth as the bloc struggles with the fallout from populist backlash against globalism at home and in the U.S.

The EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, or CETA, was adopted with support from 408 deputies in the 751-member European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, almost eight years after the start of negotiations.

CETA now goes into provisional effect, lifting tariffs on roughly 9,000 industrial, agricultural and food items, including beef and fish. Service industries, including banking and insurance, will also open up for competition.

The trade pact with Canada marks a rare victory for the EU, which has been struggling to rally policy support from its 28 member states. Brussels is pushing to expand the

bloc's global links and filling the void amid rising protectionism in the West, as Britain prepares to exit from the EU and President Donald Trump has criticized existing U.S. trade agreements while saying he would back other bilateral deals.

"This is a crucial step," said Marietje Schaake, an EU lawmaker from the Netherlands with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. "While U.S. trade policy under President Trump is unpredictable, and he turns his back towards the world by raising tariff walls, Europe proves it is a reliable trade partner."

The European Commission said CETA is expected to give a 23% boost to bilateral trade that was worth €63.5 billion of goods in 2015 and €27.2 billion in services in 2014.

The deal comes ahead of the U.K.'s plan to start talks to leave the bloc, which could disrupt trade as Prime Minister Theresa May extracts Britain from Europe's single market.

CETA also goes into effect as the EU eyes Mr. Trump's proposed border tax and his approach to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership, a proposed pact between the world's two biggest economic blocs that was an important agenda item for the Obama administration.

After more than three years of negotiations, however, chances of an agreement between the EU and its largest trading partner are diminishing. Mr. Trump has already nixed the previous U.S. administration's landmark deal with 12 countries that border the Pacific Ocean—meant to counter China's rising economic clout. The president also pledged to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, signed by former U.S. President Bill Clinton with Canada and Mexico.

Meanwhile, the EU is also in talks with Japan for a similar trade deal and seeks to complete pacts with Vietnam, among other nations, as well as other regions in Asia and Africa.

Yet there is also significant resistance within the bloc. Before an agreement in October by all EU governments to back the pact with Canada, Belgium's French-speaking

region, Wallonia, blocked the accord for weeks, citing concerns over a court system designated to settle investment disputes.

The bloc's initiatives are also feeling reverberations as populist anti-EU parties, from both the left and the right, gain in polls from the Netherlands to France and Germany ahead of pivotal elections this year.

Demonstrators gathered outside the European Parliament on Wednesday to protest the adoption of trade deal with Canada.

CETA's full implementation, including dispute settlement, still requires ratification by more than 30 national and regional parliaments in the EU, which could take months or years.

"There is still a long way to go for this agreement," said Anne-Marie Mineur, a lawmaker from a left-wing group that opposes the pact. "The people of Europe still get to have a say in the matter."

**The
New York
Times**

Europe's Tech Sector Shrugs Off Regional Uncertainty

Mark Scott

There are plenty of reasons to avoid doing business in Europe: sluggish economic growth, concerns over security and terrorism, as well as political uncertainty.

But venture capitalists and tech start-ups across the region have considered those risks and met them with a collective shrug.

Funds have continued to raise large amounts of money to finance start-ups from Berlin to Bratislava, despite the rise of populist parties ahead of elections in France and Germany this year, questions over Britain's exit from the European Union and terrorist attacks that have left many on edge.

In another sign of that sentiment, Niklas Zennstrom, a founder of Skype who now runs Atomico, a venture capital firm, on Thursday announced a new \$765 million fund, one of Europe's largest-ever tech venture capital fund-raising. The money will primarily be used to find fledgling European companies that can eventually compete on a global stage still dominated by Silicon Valley.

"We've had some political headwinds, but the underlying European tech ecosystem remains strong," Mr. Zennstrom, 51, said in an interview.

"Success of tech companies is very binary: They will work or they will not," he added. "Some macroeconomic ups-and-downs are not going to make a big difference."

European tech start-ups received a combined \$17.1 billion in venture funding last year, an 11 percent rise over 2015 and more than four times the amount that start-ups pocketed in 2012, according to Tech.eu, a website that tracks regional fund-raising.

Despite the bullish growth, Europe's fund-raising efforts were still dwarfed by those in the United States, where tech companies raised a combined \$40.9 billion in 2016, according to CB Insights, a research firm.

"Going forward, Silicon Valley won't be as important if you're an entrepreneur building a start-up," said Jeppe Zink, a partner at Northzone, a Scandinavian venture firm that raised a new \$316 million fund last year and was an early

backer of Spotify, the Swedish music streaming service. "But right now, it's still the place to beat when growing a company."

Analysts say that Europe's smaller pool of venture capital may have helped the region's start-ups to avoid some of the excesses of Silicon Valley, where many new companies have received millions, if not billions, of dollars — often at eye-watering valuations — only for their business ideas to fall flat.

Some privately held companies like Uber and Airbnb have become global giants through such venture backing. And while fears of a major downturn in United States venture capital failed to emerge last year, several prominent start-ups like Theranos, the blood-testing company, imploded after the technology was found wanting.

Ciaran O'Leary, a partner at BlueYard Capital, a Berlin-based venture firm, said most European start-ups still did not have the luxury of burning through their fund-raising at record speeds. Instead, he said, they must focus on generating revenues at an early stage, even if

that hurts their global expansion plans.

"There hasn't been a chilling effect on funding, but start-ups really have to focus on getting their operations right," he said.

For Mr. Zennstrom, who moved to London in 2002, before the creation of Skype, the drastic fall in the cost of technology and an increasingly global talent pool of engineers mean that it has never been easier to start a company in the region.

But Europe's tech sector still faces significant difficulties in its attempt to keep pace with Silicon Valley. Entrepreneurs are now questioning whether London, Europe's largest tech hub, will remain an attractive place to start a tech company after Britain leaves the European Union. The region's venture funding is also still significantly smaller than what is available in the United States.

"In Europe, we don't have the luxury of endless amounts of money," Mr. Zennstrom said. "We've had to work in a smarter way."

**The
New York
Times**

Ireland's Prime Minister in Crisis Over Case of Police Whistle-Blower

Sinead O'Shea

But the case won't go away. Last week, The Irish Examiner and the

public broadcaster RTE's "Prime Time" program reported that Ireland's child protection agency had

created a file on Sergeant McCabe containing a false accusation of child sexual abuse — a mistake that

the agency has attributed to what it called a clerical error. The news organizations also reported that this

wasn't the first time Sergeant McCabe had been wrongly accused of such a crime; an earlier complaint against him had been made, in 2006, and dismissed.

The disclosure that a whistle-blower could face such accusations in apparent retaliation has raised unsettling questions about Ireland's culture of policing and the possible collusion of other agencies, including the child protection agency.

The case has affected the highest levels of the Irish government, bedeviling Mr. Kenny. He has been attacked by critics who charge that he missed opportunities to resolve the mess in 2014, and supported the police chief at the time and his justice minister for too long.

Mr. Kenny failed at first to give a complete account of when he learned of the false abuse allegations, and has insisted that he knew nothing of a broader smear campaign — an assertion that his critics in Parliament have contested.

There were heated exchanges between Mr. Kenny and Gerry Adams, the leader of the opposition Sinn Féin party. At one point, Mr. Kenny called Mr. Adams an "absolute hypocrite" and attacked him for playing down, years earlier, the case of a former Sinn Féin member who said she was sexually abused by IRA members — a charge that Mr. Adams denies.

Mr. Kenny has pledged a new official inquiry into the latest developments in the McCabe case.

Late Wednesday night he survived a no-confidence motion put forward by Sinn Féin. Both Mr. Kenny's party, Fine Gael, and its coalition partner, Fianna Fáil, had little appetite for fresh elections that could unsettle their fragile government. But observers say the prime minister has been wounded by the scandal, and may not survive long after he returns from a trip to Washington to meet President Trump for St. Patrick's Day.

On Wednesday evening, ahead of the vote, Mr. Kenny apologized in Parliament to Sergeant McCabe. He called the allegations against him "appalling."

"He and his family deserve the truth, as do all against whom allegations have been made," Mr. Kenny said. "And I therefore offer a full apology to Maurice McCabe and his family for the treatment handed out to them as exposed in recent programs."

Sergeant McCabe, and his wife, Lorraine, said in a statement that they had been victims of a "long and sustained campaign to destroy our characters." They added: "We have endured eight years of great suffering, private nightmare, public defamation, and state vilification arising solely," they said, from Sergeant McCabe's determination to ensure that the police agency "adheres to decent and appropriate standards of policing in its dealings with the Irish people."

Sergeant McCabe, 55, a father of five from County Westmeath in the center of the country, has been on sick leave since last year.

The McCabe case has exposed the secretive and insular nature of the police service. An internal investigation into Sergeant McCabe's complaints found no evidence of corruption, but concluded that some officers had failed to follow procedures. But a police chief, Martin Callinan, stunned the country when he told lawmakers in 2014 that whistle-blowers like Sergeant McCabe were "disgusting." (He later took early retirement.)

Dermot Walsh, a law professor at the University of Kent in England who has studied police and criminal justice in Ireland, said the uproar "was not so much what he was complaining about as the fact that he took his complaints outside the force — in other words, he was seen as not a team player, not a member of the club."

Professor Walsh added that Sergeant McCabe "had stepped over to the other side of the line between 'them' and 'us,' " and compared the case to that of Detective Serpico. He also said the hierarchical organization of the police agency made it resistant to criticism from its lower ranks.

In 2014, the justice minister, Alan Shatter, resigned after a report commissioned by the government found that the government and the police had failed to address Sergeant McCabe's allegations adequately.

A second report, prepared by a commission led by a judge, Kevin O'Higgins, found that Sergeant

McCabe had performed "a genuine public service at considerable personal cost."

Now, the case is about to get yet another look. Mr. Kenny has promised to investigate whether a smear campaign targeted Sergeant McCabe.

The task was originally assigned to a private commission of inquiry, led by a judge, but after the latest furor, Mr. Kenny agreed to appoint a tribunal, whose proceedings will be open to the public — something that Sergeant McCabe said he believed was essential.

Another whistle-blower, Superintendent David Taylor, a former police press officer, has come forward to say that the existence of a smear campaign against Sergeant McCabe was widely known within the police force and by his superiors, including Commissioner Noírin O'Sullivan. She has asserted her innocence. "I have made it clear that I was not part of any campaign to spread rumors about Sergeant McCabe and didn't know it was happening at the time it was happening," Commissioner O'Sullivan said in a statement on Monday.

Yet another police officer, Superintendent Keith Harrison, has come forward, saying that he stopped a colleague for drunken driving in 2009 and, in retaliation, found his family referred to the child protection agency over a baseless allegation.

INTERNATIONAL

The
Washington
Post

Trump steps back from U.S. commitment to two-state Israeli-Palestinian solution (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/anne.gearan>

At a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House, President Trump said he would like Israel to stop constructing Jewish settlements. At a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Trump says he would like Israel to stop constructing Jewish settlements. (Reuters)

At a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House, President Trump said he would like

Israel to stop constructing Jewish settlements. (Reuters)

President Trump backed away on Wednesday from long-standing U.S. support for the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel, potentially signaling the death of a fundamental strategy of past Middle East peace negotiations, even as Trump said he wants to try his hand at a new deal.

Trump appeared to open the negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their news conference at the White House, directly calling for Israel to curtail Jewish home-building in the West Bank.

In his most extensive remarks as president about the chances for peace in the Middle East, Trump said he "could live with" either a separate Palestinian state or a unitary state as a peaceful outcome.

"I want the one that both parties want," he said.

[Trump says he really wants Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, warns both sides to 'act reasonably']

That is a significant departure from past U.S. policy supporting the goal of an independent Palestine. Republican and Democratic presidents have backed a future Palestine on West Bank land that is now under Israeli military occupation. For years, U.S. officials

have endorsed "two states for two peoples, living side by side in peace and security" as a matter of course.

"I'd like to see you hold back on settlements for a little bit," Trump said as he welcomed Netanyahu for their first meeting since the Republican president took office. "We'll work something out," he added.

The new U.S. president confidently predicted that he will help broker an end to the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I would like to see a deal be made. I think a deal will be made," Trump said. "I know that every president would like to. Most of them have not started until late, because they

never thought it was possible. And it wasn't possible, because they didn't do it."

Trump gave no timetable for the larger effort but suggested it would come soon. He flattered Netanyahu but also pressured him.

"Bibi and I have known each other a long time," Trump continued, using the Israeli leader's nickname. "Smart man. Great negotiator. And I think we're going to make a deal. It might be a bigger and better deal than people in this room even understand, so that's a possibility."

Then, with his body turned toward Netanyahu, Trump put him on the spot.

"So let's see what we do," Trump invited.

"Let's try," Netanyahu replied.

He did not look pleased, but Trump laughed it off.

"That doesn't sound too optimistic," Trump said. "Good negotiator."

At that, Netanyahu brightened.

"That's the art of the deal," he said to laughter.

Both leaders seemed to indicate that what was once an accepted formula of two sovereign states is now open to a broader scope of ideas about what could bring about a peace deal. They each pointed to a regional approach that would involve a broad spectrum of Middle Eastern states and by default, eventually, the Palestinians.

"The Israelis are going to have to show some flexibility, which is hard, it's hard to do," Trump said. "They're going to have to show the fact that they really want to make a deal. I think our new concept that we've been discussing actually for a while is something that allows them to show more flexibility than they have in the past, because we have a lot bigger canvas to play with."

Netanyahu said that first the Palestinians must recognize Israel as the Jewish state and stop calling for its destruction. He insisted that Israel to retain security of the western banks of the Jordan River, a sliver of land that would allow Israel to encircle any future Palestinian state.

"I want to deal with substance, not labels. The world is fixated on labels and not on the substance," Netanyahu said in response to a question about the future of two states. "But if anyone believes that I, as prime minister of Israel,

responsible for the security of my country, would blindly walk into a Palestinian terrorist state that seeks the destruction of my country, they're gravely mistaken."

Netanyahu's caution stems partly from his skepticism about a peace deal and partly from political pressure at home. The Israeli political far right, elements of which Netanyahu needs as part of his governing coalition, reportedly urged him to make no concessions in Washington and not to even utter the words "two-state solution."

[Netanyahu is urged not to use the words 'Palestinian state' when he visits Trump]

Although Trump did not reject the two-state idea, many Palestinians would view any U.S. shift away from it as a virtual abandonment of a principle also adopted by the European Union and the United Nations. The United States remains a part of the international negotiating body known as the Quartet, which is pledged to two states achieved through negotiations.

"We believe undermining the two state solution is not a joke, said Saeb Erekat, a top Palestinian official and former peace negotiator. "It's a disaster and a tragedy for Israelis and Palestinians."

Erekat, a veteran of seven U.S.-brokered peace talks with Israel, said the Palestinian Authority remains committed to the two-state idea. He said it was the Israeli leaders and supporters of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank who were opposed to a Palestinian state.

CIA chief Mike Pompeo held secret talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank on Tuesday, according to a senior Palestinian official.

Erekat said the alternative to two states was "a single democratic secular state for Jews, Muslims and Christians," with full rights for all. Such a single state, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, would hold almost equal numbers of Jewish and Muslim voters.

Palestinians in the West Bank live under an almost 50-year military occupation. In the separate Gaza Strip, the population lives under severe trade and travel controls.

"To those who think the current system today is acceptable, having one state with two systems — which is apartheid — I don't think they can

sustain it," Erekat said. "Not in the 21st century."

Netanyahu has warned that a new Palestinian state could quickly be taken over by the Islamist militant movement Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip and is committed to Israel's destruction. Israel and Hamas have fought three years in the last nine years.

Netanyahu publicly backed the idea of two states for two peoples in 2009. It was partly a gesture to the then-new U.S. president, Barack Obama, but their relations quickly soured.

The last time Netanyahu ran for office in 2015, he promised voters a Palestinian state would never be created under his watch. He later walked the statement back.

The Israeli minister for public security and member of Netanyahu's Likud Party, Gilad Erdan, told Israel's Army Radio earlier this week that "all the cabinet ministers oppose a Palestinian state, including Netanyahu."

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres, speaking in Cairo on Wednesday, warned, "There is no alternative solution for the situation between the Palestinians and Israelis, other than the solution of establishing two states, and we should do all that can be done to maintain this."

The Trump-Netanyahu news conference, part of a nearly day-long White House visit, was the public face of a new chapter in U.S.-Israeli relations after the testiness and rancor of Netanyahu's dealings with Obama. But there were hints of potential problems for Trump and Netanyahu, too, despite their friendship and Trump's fiercely pro-Israel stance.

Trump's insistence that a deal can be done, and his suggestion that he will move quickly to seek one, puts Netanyahu in the middle, between a powerful political constituency and his most important ally.

"If we work together, we have a shot," he told Trump.

Trump was not more specific about settlements, which have become one of the main obstacles to a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, but his administration had previously called on Israel not to expand existing settlement blocs. Trump has also said that he views expanded settlements as unhelpful as he tries to inaugurate a peace effort.

Speaking to Israeli journalists later Wednesday, Netanyahu acknowledged that he and Trump do not see eye to eye on the settlement issue.

"We spoke about the settlements, and we agreed to continue talking about this issue in order to reach an agreement," Netanyahu said.

Over the past few weeks, Netanyahu's government has announced the creation of some 5,500 additional housing units within existing Israeli settlements, as well as the creation of a new settlement to soften the blow to a community the Israeli authorities were forced to raze on Feb. 2 after the Supreme Court ruled it had been built illegally on private Palestinian land.

Local Politics Alerts

Breaking news about local government in D.C., Md., Va.

Please provide a valid email address.

Netanyahu said that the housing units would go ahead as planned but held back on saying whether an entirely new settlement would be created.

"There is always the question of what to do in the future, but we do not second-guess what has happened in the past," he said.

At the news conference, Trump was asked about his campaign promise to quickly move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump said he supports the idea but is considering it "with great care." Arab allies have urged Trump to slow down or cancel that pledge, for fear of inflaming anti-Israel sentiment and lessening Arab governments' leverage over the Palestinians in a peace negotiation.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and close aide, sat in the front row during the news conference. Trump has said Kushner will be his chief envoy for a peace push. Trump's choice for U.S. ambassador to Israel, New York lawyer David L. Friedman, is expected to be another main player in a U.S.-sponsored peace push. Friedman is a public supporter of West Bank settlements and has suggested the two-state option is no longer realistic.

— William Booth contributed from Jericho, West Bank

Trump, Meeting With Netanyahu, Backs Away From Palestinian State (UNE)

Peter Baker and Mark Landler

Mr. Trump's position on a two-state solution discarded a policy that has underpinned America's role in Middle East peacemaking since the Clinton administration and raised a host of thorny questions.

The Palestinians are highly unlikely to accept anything short of a sovereign state, and a single Israeli state encompassing the Palestinians would either leave them as second-class citizens or would no longer be majority Jewish, given the growth rate of the Arab population.

Still, long before Mr. Trump's ascension, momentum for side-by-side states had faded not just in Washington but also in the Middle East, where many Israelis and Palestinians have given up hope or changed their minds about the concept. The leaders of both sides face domestic difficulties and seem unenthusiastic about the compromises that might be required to get to a mutually agreeable resolution.

The trick is that no one has offered a plausible alternative that would satisfy both camps, leaving the conflict in a state of suspended animation. Mr. Netanyahu is under pressure from his right-leaning coalition to abandon the two-state solution and even annex parts of the West Bank. And the Palestinian Authority faces pressure from Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza and is sworn to Israel's destruction.

Mr. Trump did not address these dynamics, instead emphasizing his confidence that he could produce a breakthrough. "I think we're going to make a deal," he said, describing that as personally important to him. "It might be a bigger and better deal than people in this room even understand."

He emphasized that Israel would have to be flexible in any future talks. "As with any successful negotiation, both sides will have to make compromises," Mr. Trump said.

Turning to Mr. Netanyahu, he asked, "You know that, right?"

Mr. Netanyahu responded with a

smile. "Both sides," he said, emphasizing the first word.

Nonetheless, Mr. Netanyahu, who nominally supports a two-state solution, quickly embraced Mr. Trump's declaration, saying he preferred to deal with the "substance" of a deal rather than "labels."

He noted that the concept of a two-state solution meant different things to different people. And he repeated his two prerequisites: that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state and that Israel maintain security control over the entire West Bank. He said the obstacle to peace was Palestinian hatred, demonstrated by the building of statues to those who carry out terrorist attacks and the payment of salaries to their families. "This is the source of the conflict," he said.

Mr. Trump's dismissal of the two-state solution seemed reminiscent of his remark during the transition that the United States should not be bound by the decades-old "one China" policy that recognizes a single Chinese government in Beijing and withholds diplomatic ties from Taiwan. That statement infuriated the Chinese leadership, and Mr. Trump eventually circled back to endorse the policy.

If Mr. Trump is serious about pursuing peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, several analysts said, he may inevitably find his way back to the two-state solution.

"If you do a systematic analysis of the situation, there is no other option," said Daniel C. Kurtzer, a former United States ambassador to Israel and Egypt. "There are Israelis who believe they could get away with giving the Palestinians minimal political rights, but they are fooling themselves. Unless the Palestinians do a 180, it is just inconceivable."

Palestinian leaders lamented Mr. Trump's stance, seeing it as an abandonment by the United States, which has been the main patron of the Palestinian Authority. But Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said Palestinians could draw comfort from Mr. Trump's eagerness

for a new peace push and his warning to Israel on settlements.

"They will see an opening in, how do you translate the president's desire for peace into something concrete?" Mr. Omari said.

Mr. Trump and Jared Kushner, his son-in-law and senior adviser, have been exploring an approach called the "outside-in" strategy, which involves enlisting Arab nations that have already found common cause with Israel against Iran, their mutual enemy, to help broker a settlement with the Palestinians.

Got a confidential news tip?

The New York Times would like to hear from readers who want to share messages and materials with our journalists.

Until now, Mr. Trump's team has largely avoided conversations with Palestinian leaders. But Mike Pompeo, the C.I.A. director, met with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, in Ramallah in the West Bank on Tuesday, according to news reports.

The idea of an independent Palestinian state comprising the West Bank and Gaza became the central theme of Middle East peacemaking in the 1990s after the Oslo Accords were signed. Bill Clinton was the first president to endorse a two-state solution, saying in a speech in January 2001, just two weeks before leaving office, that the conflict would never be settled without "a sovereign, viable Palestinian state."

His successor, George W. Bush, picked that up later that year, becoming the first president to make it official American policy. Barack Obama considered a two-state solution the unquestionable bedrock of Washington's approach. But those presidents never got to the point of an agreement between the two parties, and Mr. Trump picked as his ambassador to Israel a lawyer, David M. Friedman, who opposes the two-state solution.

Mr. Netanyahu looked forward to Mr. Trump's inauguration as the first time in his four terms as prime minister that he would have a Republican president as a partner.

After years of tension with Mr. Obama, who pressed Israel for more concessions for peace, Mr. Netanyahu anticipated vigorous support from the new president.

But Mr. Trump's focus on the Palestinian conflict and his push for a pause in settlements distracted from the topic Mr. Netanyahu preferred to address, the threat from Iran. At the news conference, Mr. Trump again called Mr. Obama's nuclear agreement with Iran "one of the worst deals I've ever seen," but said nothing about abandoning it or even renegotiating it. Instead, he simply vowed to keep Iran from becoming a nuclear power. "I will do more to prevent Iran from ever developing — I mean ever — a nuclear weapon," he said.

Nor did he repeat his campaign vow to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, saying only, "I'd love to see that happen" and, "We'll see what happens."

But he made a show of warmly welcoming Mr. Netanyahu, even inviting the prime minister's wife, Sara, to stand during the news conference. The Israeli first lady was then treated to a museum tour by Mr. Trump's wife, Melania.

Still, the president was pressed by an Israeli reporter about a rise in anti-Semitic attacks across the country since his election. The reporter asked what he would say to those "who believe and feel that your administration is playing with xenophobia and maybe racist tones."

In a meandering response, Mr. Trump cited his victory in the Electoral College, then promised "to do everything within our power to stop long-simmering racism." He pointed to Mr. Kushner, who is Jewish, and his daughter Ivanka, who converted when she married Mr. Kushner, to dispel suggestions of anti-Semitism.

"As far as Jewish people, so many friends — a daughter who happens to be here right now, a son-in-law and three beautiful grandchildren," he said, vowing to promote comity. "You're going to see a lot of love."

decide among themselves whether a two-state solution is the best approach to peace.

After news of the U.S. shift emerged late Tuesday, European governments showed no signs of reviewing their positions on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"As far as we're concerned it's clear that, in spite of all the difficulties, we are convinced that the two-state solution is the only solution that can bring peace to the region and fulfill the expectations of both sides," said Sebastian Fischer, Germany's foreign ministry's spokesman.

British Prime Minister Theresa May last week told Mr. Netanyahu during a meeting at Downing Street that the U.K. was committed to a two-state solution as the best way to bring stability to the region. She also reiterated Britain's opposition to the

expansion of settlements. A spokesman on Wednesday said Mrs. May's position hadn't changed.

Israel's right-wing lawmakers who have been calling on Mr. Netanyahu to abandon his commitment to a Palestinian state hailed the meeting with Mr. Trump as it affirmed White House policy that it wouldn't force a two-state solution on the two sides.

"Now we must look ahead and shape a new strategic approach in light of the new reality," said Naftali Bennett, the leader of the Jewish Home party in Mr. Netanyahu's coalition government.

Settlers have sought to cement their presence in the West Bank, and many oppose the two-state solution. They have argued that moving hundreds of thousands of settlers would make it expensive and difficult

to strike a peace deal based on swapping land.

There are roughly 400,000 settlers living in the West Bank, according to groups that track the issue. More than 100,000 live outside the major settlement blocs that Israel would probably want to hold onto in any deal, according to those groups.

"The almost half-a-million Israelis residing in Judea and Samaria are an irreversible fact," said Oded Revivi, chief foreign envoy for the nongovernmental Yesha Council, which represents settlements, using the biblical names for the West Bank. "Nothing about our presence is temporary."

But Palestinian officials maintain that the two-state solution reflects the longstanding international consensus.

"If the Trump Administration rejects this policy it would be destroying the chances for peace and undermining American interests, standing and credibility abroad," said Hanan Ashrawi, a top official with the Palestine Liberation Organization, which represents Palestinian political factions in peace negotiations.

"It's difficult to see the Palestinians coming to the table today without the formula of the Palestinian state," said Sallai Meridor, Israel's former ambassador to the U.S. "Nor is it likely to see Arab countries joining any process if the issue of the Palestinian state is not on the table."

—Jenny Gross in London and Zeke Turner in Berlin contributed to this article.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.S., Middle East Allies Explore Arab Military Coalition

Maria Abi-Habib

Updated Feb. 15,

2017 5:50 p.m. ET

BEIRUT—The Trump administration is in talks with Arab allies about having them form a military alliance that would share intelligence with Israel to help counter their mutual foe, Iran, several Middle Eastern officials said.

The alliance would include countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that are avowed enemies of Israel, as well as Egypt and Jordan, which have longstanding peace treaties with Israel, five officials from Arab countries involved in the discussions said. Other Arab countries could also join the alliance.

For the Arab countries involved, the alliance would have a NATO-style mutual-defense component under which an attack on one member would be treated as an attack on all, though details are still being worked out, the officials said.

The U.S. would offer military and intelligence support to the alliance, beyond the kind of limited backing it has been providing to a Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, the officials said. But neither the U.S. nor Israel would be part of the mutual-defense pact.

"They've been asking diplomatic missions in Washington if we'd be willing to join this force that has an Israeli component," one Arab diplomat said. "Israel's role would likely be intelligence sharing, not training or boots on the ground. They'd provide intelligence and targets. That's what the Israelis are good at."

Trump administration officials have said they want to revitalize American alliances in the area and take new steps to constrain the regional influence wielded by Iran, though they didn't respond to requests for comment on the plan. A spokesman for Israel's prime minister didn't respond to a request for comment.

But at a news conference on Wednesday with President Donald Trump, the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said, "I believe that the great opportunity for peace comes from a regional approach from involving our newfound Arab partners."

Mr. Trump followed by saying, "It is something that is very different, hasn't been discussed before. And it's actually a much bigger deal—much more important deal in a sense. It would take in many, many countries and would cover a very large territory."

It isn't clear how far the talks on an alliance have proceeded. Currently, the Arab countries involved in the talks have no mutual-defense agreements.

Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. are putting forth their own demands in exchange for cooperating with Israel, officials said. Those two countries want the U.S. to overturn legislation that could see their governments sued in American courts by families of victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, they said.

Trump administration officials have told Gulf allies they would lobby Congress to amend the legislation, though it passed last year with overwhelming support that could make changes difficult. Some representatives have expressed

regret for supporting the legislation because of concerns the legislation could allow foreigners in turn to sue the U.S. government in other cases, and have voiced plans to amend it.

The Middle Eastern officials said Arab diplomats in Washington have been holding talks about the plan with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Mike Flynn, who was President Trump's national security adviser until resigning on Monday. Diplomats who spoke before Mr. Flynn's resignation said plans for the alliance would be discussed during Mr. Mattis's visit to the region this month.

Mr. Flynn floated a similar idea in testimony to Congress in June 2015, shortly after he left his position as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. He urged the U.S. government to create and support an "Arab NATO-like structure and framework," to counter Iran and extremist groups such as Islamic State. "Build an Arab army that is able to secure their regional responsibilities."

One Arab diplomat suggested that the notion that the Trump administration might designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group was being floated as an incentive for Egypt to join the alliance. The current Egyptian government sees the Brotherhood—which it overthrew in a coup in 2013—as a terrorist organization.

The Trump administration has asked Egypt—which has had a peace treaty with Israel since 1979—to host a combined force, although Saudi Arabia is eager to do so, the officials said. But one official said the alliance may be difficult to

cobble together, with a 2015 proposal to create a pan-Arab force gaining little traction.

The Sunni Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia are locked in a power struggle with Shiite Iran for regional influence, which has traditionally played out through proxies. The new alliance would expand upon the existing Saudi-led coalition of Sunni countries fighting in Yemen, the officials said.

The new alliance's first test would be in Yemen. The U.S. would step up military aid to the Yemen campaign and secure the Red Sea, a vital global shipping route threatened by the war, according to two officials. In late January, the Houthis—Iran's allies in Yemen—launched a deadly attack on a Saudi warship in the Red Sea.

The Obama administration blocked the sale of some advanced weapons systems to Saudi Arabia over human-rights concerns in Yemen, with more than 10,000 civilians killed in that conflict so far, according to the United Nations, the majority by Saudi-led airstrikes.

In talks with administration officials over the past two weeks, Emirati and Saudi officials have expressed admiration for Israeli security and intelligence capabilities, tacitly agreeing to pool intelligence with the Israelis if the alliance is formed, the officials said.

Arab diplomats have told administration officials they would pursue more overt cooperation with Israel if it ceases settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—something Israel refused to do under intense pressure from the Obama administration.

The diplomats also said their countries' cooperation would be contingent upon the Trump administration refraining from moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, an effective recognition of Israel's claim to Jerusalem as its capital. In recent weeks, the administration has walked back previous statements supporting settlement construction

and moving the embassy.

Israel and Saudi Arabia staunchly opposed the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with the U.S. and five other world powers, which lifted sanctions on Tehran in exchange for curbs on some of its nuclear activities. Arab officials have said Israel and Saudi Arabia already covertly share intelligence on Iran and its proxies,

such as the Lebanese militant and political group Hezbollah.

Maj. Gen. Ahmed Asiri, a military adviser to Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Defense, said he couldn't comment on a plan that isn't yet official. He welcomed the prospect of greater military cooperation among the Arab countries but said he couldn't comment specifically on plans for intelligence collaboration with Israel.

"With Israel, we don't have official relations," Gen. Asiri said. But, he added, "the Israelis are facing the same Iranian threat, exactly like us."

—Margherita Stancati, Rory Jones and Jay Solomon contributed to this article.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Trump Drops Push for Two-State Solution in Mideast (UNE)

Damian Paletta and Carol E. Lee

Updated Feb. 15, 2017 6:22 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump abandoned Washington's decades-old push for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, saying the two sides should determine for themselves whether separate states were necessary for peace and hinting at a broader approach to Mideast discord.

"I'm looking at two-state and one-state and I like the one that both parties like," he said Wednesday at a White House press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "I'm very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one."

Mr. Trump at one point turned to Mr. Netanyahu, standing at a lectern several feet away, and called on him to "hold back on settlements for a little bit." Mr. Netanyahu declined to agree to that, saying he would discuss it further with Mr. Trump "so we don't keep on bumping into each other" on the issue.

The joint press conference opened the first meeting between the two leaders since Mr. Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration. The president has vowed to improve relations with Israel, and Mr. Netanyahu said the new president's commitment to Israel is strong.

But their brief exchange revealed that Mr. Trump is already having to confront some issues in the region that have long vexed U.S. presidents.

Mr. Trump has vowed for months to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, but on Wednesday he said only that "I'd love to see that happen."

Mr. Netanyahu also pushed back at Mr. Trump's suggestion that Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories were an impediment to a peace deal.

"I believe that the issue of the settlements is not the core of the conflict, nor does it really drive the

conflict," the Israeli leader said. "I think it's an issue that has to be resolved in the context of peace negotiations."

The call for separate states for Israelis and Palestinians has been the official U.S. policy of Democratic and Republican administrations for decades, and was the tenet guiding historic talks at Camp David in 1978 and others that began in Oslo in 1993. Most governments and international organizations back that position, which the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority have also embraced.

Mr. Netanyahu has officially advocated a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2009, but in practice he has approved increased settlement construction that the U.S. has said imperils that approach. He is under pressure from members of his right-wing coalition government to abandon support for a Palestinian state.

A joint statement issued by Messrs. Trump and Netanyahu after the meeting said that they didn't reach an agreement on the settlements issue.

"The two leaders discussed the issue of Israeli settlement construction, and agreed to continue those discussions and to work out an approach that is consistent with the goal of advancing peace and security," the statement said.

On Wednesday Mr. Netanyahu suggested a common concern in the Mideast over Iran's growing influence might be at the center of a broader peace effort, including "not just the United States and Israel, but so many others in the region who see eye to eye on the great magnitude and danger of the Iranian threat."

The Trump administration is discussing with Arab allies forming a military alliance that would share intelligence with Israel to help counter Iran, several Middle Eastern officials said.

Mr. Trump said on Wednesday his distancing himself from the two-state approach gives the Israelis and Palestinians leeway to reach a deal.

He called on both sides to make compromises and said he would support Israelis and Palestinians as they work toward a peace deal, but he said any agreement would have to ultimately be worked out between them.

"It is the parties themselves who must directly negotiate such an agreement," Mr. Trump said. "We'll be beside them. We'll be working with them."

The administration's abandonment of the two-state track drew some sharp criticism.

Rep. Eliot Engel of New York, the top Democrat on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said a sustainable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires establishing two states.

"The alternatives to a two-state solution would mean that Israel would have to choose between its commitment to democracy and the solemn obligation to be a homeland for the Jewish people," Mr. Engel said, an apparent reference to the challenge of integrating more than four million people in the Palestinian territories with Israel's predominantly Jewish population of eight million. "The parties must come back to the negotiating table to find a mutually agreed-upon solution."

The liberal pro-Israel lobbying group J Street said it was "deeply concerned" that Messrs. Trump and Netanyahu "studiously avoided endorsing a two-state solution."

"Worse, the president indicated that he considers a one-state configuration to be a plausible outcome of the conflict," the group said. "This statement flies in the face of established American policy and will undoubtedly create damaging confusion among our allies and adversaries."

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas didn't acknowledge the shift, saying after

the meeting he would continue to work with the U.S. administration on establishing two states, while calling on Israel to heed Mr. Trump's call to hold back on settlements.

The topic of relocating the U.S. Embassy is no less controversial. Democrats and Republicans have vowed in the past to move the embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, and a 1995 U.S. law requires the move. But since then, presidents from both parties have used a national-security waiver included in the law to avoid doing so.

This is in large part because of complaints and threats from Palestinian leaders and others in the Middle East. They have said moving the embassy to Jerusalem—which the Palestinians also claim as their capital—would make it more difficult to reach a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians, an argument Mr. Trump and his aides have rejected.

Also in December, Mr. Trump announced he would nominate one of his longtime friends and lawyers, David Friedman, to be his ambassador to Israel. In accepting the appointment, Mr. Friedman said that he looked "forward to doing this from the U.S. Embassy in Israel's eternal capital, Jerusalem." The Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing Thursday on Mr. Friedman's nomination.

Mr. Netanyahu stood up for Mr. Trump when an Israeli reporter asked the U.S. president about concerns among Jews in the U.S. and Israel that the administration was trafficking in xenophobia and "racist tones."

"I've known the president and I've known his family and his team for a long time," Mr. Netanyahu said. "There is no greater supporter of the Jewish people and the Jewish state than President Donald Trump. I think we should put that to rest."

Israeli Settlement Sees Friendly Faces in Trump Administration

Isabel Kershner

And as president of the American fund-raising arm of Beit El's yeshiva complex, he has raised millions of dollars for its related institutions, including housing projects for teachers and students. He has made almost yearly visits there during the Jewish holiday Sukkot.

In the days leading up to Mr. Netanyahu's first meeting with Mr. Trump as president, and Mr. Friedman's confirmation hearings, which are expected to start on Thursday, the mood in Beit El seemed to encapsulate all the uncertainty and contradictions manifested by the new administration.

On the one hand, Mr. Trump publicly signaled last week that the administration had neared its limit with settlement expansion, saying in an interview that he did not believe it to be "a good thing for peace."

But Mr. Trump's foundation once made a \$10,000 donation to Beit El's yeshiva institutions in honor of the Friedmans. And the parents of Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law and adviser, have donated generously. Yaakov Katz, a founder of Beit El and its fund-raising enterprise, said in a radio interview in December.

Swinging between hopes of almost unbridled settlement growth and

skepticism, several residents said they were "cautiously optimistic."

Located north of the Palestinian city of Ramallah, in the heartland of the territory of any future Palestinian state, Beit El is an ideological hotbed of the settler movement and has strong biblical associations. Its name is Hebrew for house of God, and some scholars have identified its location as the place where Jacob, the biblical patriarch, laid his head on a pillow of stones and dreamed of angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth.

A large, upright stone on a terraced hillside on the edge of the settlement is revered as the one that Jacob slept on, then anointed with oil, after God appeared in the dream and promised all the land around to him and his progeny.

Archaeological excavations in the area have found signs of ancient life. The Palestinian village of Beitin sits on a nearby hill.

Mr. Netanyahu has said in the past that he would not evacuate Beit El under any agreement with the Palestinians, even though it lies outside the major settlement blocs that Israeli leaders have more generally insisted on keeping.

Founded in 1977 on private Palestinian land originally seized by Israel for military purposes, the settlement was later approved by

the Israeli courts under the rubric of general security. Now it is home to about 6,500 people who mostly live in modest, low-rise two- or four-family buildings. There are plans in the pipeline for at least 300 new apartments in eight-story buildings to be constructed on a rise by the entrance to the settlement.

But the yeshiva complex has so far proven to be Beit El's main engine of growth.

Considered a prime institution of religious Zionism, the yeshiva is headed by Rabbi Zalman Baruch Melamed, a hard-liner who has denounced homosexuality as a "perversion" and "a severe mental illness" and has ruled that it is forbidden for soldiers or police to participate in the evacuation of settlements.

On a recent morning, dozens of yeshiva students in their late teens or early 20s were huddled over Talmudic texts, alone or in pairs, in the vast hall of a new building that was completed last year.

"Beit El's greatest 'product' is its educational institutions," said Chaim Silberstein, a South African-born resident and member of the local council who moved here as a yeshiva student in the 1980s. "It's an industry."

Mr. Katz, known as Ketzale, was the driving force behind the yeshiva, its religious high schools for boys and

girls and the pre-army academy. A charismatic former member of the Israeli Parliament from a hard-right party, Mr. Katz, a staunch nationalist, is credited with building up the fund-raising network in the United States and bringing in tens of millions of dollars.

Mr. Friedman's late father, Morris, commemorated on a plaque as a "founding member of Beit El," was one of the first American Jews to meet Mr. Katz when he started going to the United States more than quarter of a century ago and could barely speak English, according to Mr. Silberstein. Another was Eugen Gluck, Beit El's main American benefactor, whose name graces the settlement's clinic.

When Mr. Friedman's nomination was announced, Mr. Katz praised him on his Facebook page as a pioneering philanthropist and settlement builder. Posting a photograph of the two of them on a boat, Mr. Katz described Mr. Friedman as "like a brother to me."

Mr. Silberstein emphasized that the money was raised for the educational institutions, not the settlement itself — an important distinction for the contributions to qualify as tax-exempt donations to settlements under American tax laws.

Editorial : Inching Toward a One-State Solution?

President Trump came forward with a nonsensical statement on Wednesday as he dangerously backed away from the two-state solution, which has been central to America's Mideast policy for more than 20 years and remains the only just answer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"So, I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like," Mr. Trump, who has no experience in Middle East peacemaking, said at a press conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, adding, "I can live with either one." There is no conceivable one-state solution that both parties will like. Smiling by Mr. Trump's side, Mr. Netanyahu, who has steadily undermined the prospect of a Palestinian state, clearly believed his vision was the one the new American president had in mind.

The two leaders seemed almost giddy in their first official meeting, which was intended to show how

Mr. Trump can be a better friend to Israel than President Barack Obama was, even though Mr. Obama completed a new 10-year, \$38 billion defense agreement with Israel.

Mr. Trump voiced optimism about getting a "great peace deal" between Israel and its neighbors. While Mr. Trump did urge Mr. Netanyahu to "hold back" on settlements in the West Bank and said Israel must make compromises, he offered no details on any peace initiative, and the vagueness of his remarks suggests he has no inkling of how to move forward. His willingness, however, to lend credence to those who would deny a separate state to the Palestinians will certainly make peace harder to achieve. Palestinians have long sought their own state and are sure to reject the idea of having their lands annexed by Israel, even if offered some kind of limited autonomy.

The two-state solution began to take shape after the 1993 Oslo accords

and was endorsed by President Bill Clinton in 2001. As recently as December, the United Nations Security Council reaffirmed its "vision of a region where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders."

The last peace negotiations collapsed in 2014, and in recent years, Israel's right-wing government has so greatly expanded settlements in the West Bank that the options for establishing a Palestinian state in that territory may be nearly foreclosed. This has led to increased talk among Israelis of the "one-state solution," in which Israel subsumes the West Bank formally while incorporating the Palestinian population or somehow shifting the Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt. The likeliest outcome, given the growth rate of the Arab population, is that Israel would be confronted with a miserable choice: to give up being a Jewish state — or to give up

being a democratic state by denying full voting rights to Palestinians.

Palestinians reacted with anger and bafflement to Mr. Trump's policy shift. "This is going to give Israel a free hand to do what it wants," said Mosheer Amer, an associate professor at the Islamic University in Gaza City. Saeb Erekat, the Palestinians' chief negotiator, raised the specter of "apartheid" and called for "concrete measures in order to save the two-state solution."

Neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Netanyahu said how Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries would be persuaded to pull back from the two-state solution. The two leaders want the Arab countries, now on better terms with Israel because of a shared hatred of Iran, to join with Israel in prodding the Palestinians into an agreement, rather than having Israelis and Palestinians first negotiate a deal that would then lead to peace with the broader Arab world.

Given what Mr. Trump said on Wednesday, there is less reason than ever to believe that he can

succeed where so many other presidents have failed.

**The
Washington
Post**

Editorial : The president makes a dubious shift on Israel

PRESIDENT
TRUMP on
Wednesday

signaled a dangerous retreat from the Middle East policy that Republican as well as Democratic presidents have pursued for the past two decades. In a news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Mr. Trump said he "can live with" a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that creates a single state for both peoples, rather than separate Israeli and Palestinian entities. He did so while strongly asserting his desire to broker "a bigger and better deal" in the region. In fact, by retreating from the two-state formula, the president has made the already slim prospects for an accord even more remote — and increased the chances that one of the few relatively peaceful corners of the region will return to conflict.

Mr. Trump cast his policy shift — which contradicted the position of

not just President Barack Obama, but also Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton — as a matter of acting as a neutral broker. "I'm looking at two states and one state. I can live with either one," he said, depending on what the Israelis and Palestinians agreed to. But there is no workable one-state formula under which Israel would remain both a Jewish state and democratic. Palestinians rightly say a single state would have to grant them equal rights, including full voting rights. Most Israelis who favor it imagine an apartheid-like system in which Palestinians would live in areas with local autonomy but without either sovereignty or the same democratic rights as Jews.

Mr. Trump may have been trying to accommodate Mr. Netanyahu, who has been under tremendous pressure from his far-right coalition partners to abandon the two-state formula, which he endorsed in 2009.

For his part, the Israeli prime minister declined to restate his support for Palestinian statehood, instead insisting that peace would require Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and accept Israeli security control over all of the West Bank.

Read These Comments

The best conversations on The Washington Post

Please provide a valid email address.

Both leaders indicated they will seek to pursue a new diplomatic avenue — first proposed last year by Mr. Netanyahu — in which Israel would develop closer ties with Arab Sunni states, which presumably would help broker a settlement with Palestinians. But Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan will never support a deal in which Palestinians do not have full political rights; Mr. Netanyahu, at least, surely

knows this. His proposal for a regional initiative is less a serious peace plan than a dodge. By naively embracing it, Mr. Trump has set himself up for diplomatic failure. He also has raised the odds that Palestinian frustration will spill over into a new wave of violence.

To his credit, Mr. Trump did seek to check Mr. Netanyahu in one area: settlements. The Israeli leader, who recently approved thousands of new West Bank housing units, responded that he would seek an agreement with Mr. Trump so "we don't bump into each other." A U.S.-Israeli deal limiting construction to existing communities close to Israel's borders would have the practical effect of preserving the possibility of side-by-side states. If Mr. Trump really wants to broker a deal, he should start by pressing Mr. Netanyahu for such a commitment.

**Los
Angeles
Times**

Editorial : Trump just casually demolished the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Times

Trump claims to know better.

Editorial Board

President Trump on Wednesday casually demolished a pillar of U.S. foreign policy under both Democratic and Republican administrations: the belief that the way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is for Israel to live side by side in peace with an independent Palestinian state.

That so-called two-state solution obviously faces formidable obstacles; negotiations are virtually moribund at the moment. But unless and until someone comes up with a better plan, the effort to create two separate states is the only conceivable way to preserve Israel as a democratic and a Jewish state and to allow Palestinians to govern themselves. Neither side will agree to less.

"I'm looking at two states and one state, and I like the one both parties like," he said at a news conference as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looked on. "I can live with either one."

To someone utterly ignorant of the history and politics of the Middle East, Trump's comment might have sounded refreshingly flexible and open-minded. But the idea that Israelis and Palestinians could agree on the arrangements for a single state is absurd.

Yes, some Israelis favor a version of a single-state solution in which Israel would annex the West Bank — but without giving Palestinian inhabitants of that territory full citizenship and full voting rights. (If they did, the sheer demography of the new state would mean the end,

effectively, of the Jewish state.) Obviously, most Palestinians would not embrace a one-state solution in which they were denied full rights.

For their part, Palestinian supporters of a single state conceive of it very differently — as a binational, secular or even Islamic state. That would be anathema to Israelis because it, too, would mean the end of the Zionist dream.

A single state that would be agreeable to both sides isn't the "ultimate deal" of Trump's imaginings; it's the ultimate fantasy.

Still, by floating that possibility, Trump undermined U.S. support for the two-state solution and relaxed the pressure on Netanyahu, whose support for the idea has always been halfhearted at best. At Wednesday's news conference the prime minister welcomed Trump's

comments and said that he wanted to "deal with substance, not labels."

Trump long has suggested that he could capitalize on his skills as a business negotiator to bring peace to the Middle East. Recently he tapped his son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner, as his representative in the region, though Kushner has no experience as a diplomat.

I think we're going to make a deal," Trump said on Wednesday. "It might be a bigger and better deal than people in this room even understand." But it's hard to imagine such a deal that didn't involve a democratic Jewish state and an independent Palestine — the very two-state solution Trump has now dismissed as dispensable.

**NATIONAL
REVIEW
ONLINE**

Victor Davis Hanson : Trump Middle East Policy Must Face Iran, Russia & ISIS

The abrupt Obama administration pre-election pullout from Iraq in 2011, along with the administration's failed reset with Russia and the Iran deal, created a three-headed hydra in the Middle East.

What makes the Middle East monster deadly is the interplay between the Iranian terrorist regime and its surrogates Hezbollah and the Assad regime; Russian president Vladimir Putin's deployment of bombers into Syria and Iraq after a 40-year Russian

hiatus in the region; and the medieval beheaders of the Islamic State.

Add into the brew anti-Americanism, genocide, millions of refugees, global terrorism, and nuclear weapons.

ISIS is simultaneously at war against the Assad regime, Iran and Iranian surrogates such as Hezbollah, and Russian expeditionary forces. ISIS also seeks to energize terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe.

Stranger still, ISIS almost surely is receiving stealth support from Sunni nations in the Middle East, some of them ostensibly American allies.

This matrix gets even crazier.

The authors of reset policy during the Obama administration are now furious at President Trump for even talking about what they tried for years: reaching out to Putin. Yet in the Middle East, Russia is doing us a favor by attacking ISIS, even as it does no favors in saving the genocidal Assad regime that has murdered tens of thousands of innocents — along with lots of ISIS terrorists as well.

Iran is the sworn enemy of the United States, yet its foreign proxies attack our shared enemy, ISIS. The very troops who once blew up Americans in Iraq with shaped charges are for now de facto allies on the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields.

Given that there is now no political support for surging thousands more U.S. troops into Iraq to reverse the disastrous Obama-administration pullout, there are three strategic choices in dealing with the Middle East hydra, all of them bad:

One, hold our nose, and for now ally with Russia and Iran to destroy ISIS first. Then deal with the other rivalries later on. (The model is the American-Soviet alliance against

Hitler that quickly morphed after 1945 into the Cold War.)

Two, work with the least awful of the three, which is probably Russia. (The model might be Henry Kissinger's outreach to Mao's China that left Moscow and Beijing at odds and confused over the role of the United States.)

Three, simply keep out of the mess and let them all diminish one another, despite the collateral damage to the innocent. (The model is the savage Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88 that weakened U.S. enemies Saddam Hussein and the Iranian theocracy, though it resulted in some 800,000 deaths.)

In the short term, option three is ostensibly the least costly — at least to the U.S. But 2 million Syrian and Iraqi refugees have swarmed Europe, coinciding with an uptick in radical Islamic terrorism. Syria is becoming the new Balkans or Rwanda — and nonintervention would mean allowing the wasteland to spread, as hundreds of thousands more civilians die or flee westward.

Which of the other two options is the least objectionable?

After 2014, we quietly pursued option one by fighting in parallel fashion with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad government against ISIS, the more dreadful enemy.

Apparently, the Obama rationale was that when ISIS was destroyed, the U.S. could then come to terms with an energized and empowered Iran rather than with Russia. The jury is out on that strategy.

The second option so far seems to be President Trump's preference: a new détente with Putin in the hope that he will back off even a bit from his support of Iran and Hezbollah as we jointly fight ISIS.

The flipping-Russia approach may seem unlikely: It assumes nuclear Russia is far less of a threat than soon-to-be-nuclear Iran. Would Putin really be willing to write off a half-century of Russian support for Syria?

Would the mercurial Putin work with moderate Sunni regimes, Israel, and the U.S. to provide regional stability?

Or can Putin see that the U.S. has mutual interests with Russia in opposing all Islamic extremism — both ISIS and Putin's Iranian clients?

Would the mercurial Putin work with moderate Sunni regimes, Israel, and the U.S. to provide regional stability?

Can Trump persuade Putin that having Iran as yet another nuclear

power near the borders of the old Soviet Union (in addition to Pakistan, India, North Korea, China, and NATO forces) is not in Russia's interest?

Would overlooking Putin's autocracy be any worse than the Obama administration's negotiations with a murderous Iran, the world's chief sponsor of terrorism? What would be Putin's steep price to abandon Assad, to ensure that Iran stays non-nuclear, and to finish the destruction of ISIS?

Overlooking Russian autocracy? Keeping mum should Putin threaten autonomous nations on his border?

These are bad choices.

Trump, a political outsider, did not create the monster. Rather, he inherited from past U.S. leaders the three-headed hydra of the Middle East.

— Victor Davis Hanson is a classicist and historian at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and the author, most recently, of *The Savior Generals*. You can reach him by e-mailing author@victorhanson.com. © 2016 Tribune Media Services, Inc.



Trump takes first step to put his stamp on Mideast peace

The Christian Science Monitor

February 15, 2017 —[Updated at 4:45 p.m. ET] President Obama's relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was icy. But the former president also made some of the strongest commitments ever by the United States to Israel's security.

As Mr. Netanyahu visited President Trump at the White House Wednesday, both sides looked to change the first part of that equation while leaving the second untouched.

In other words, Netanyahu didn't lecture Mr. Trump about Israel's security in front of the press, as he did to Mr. Obama at the White House in 2011. At the same time, Trump didn't use the moment to abandon the Iran nuclear deal or to move the US embassy to Jerusalem — though he did cause a stir by saying he would be open to a one-state solution, in which Palestinian areas would be a part of Israel.

"I would say for both sides, the primary objective of this meeting is to change the political theater of the relationship," says Michele Flournoy, a former under secretary of Defense

for policy and now the head of the Center for a New American Security in Washington. "To the extent there are differences, those will be downplayed or subordinated [because] this is really about cementing a feel-good political relationship between these two leaders."

An important shift?

Trump's measured tone on Israel so far had contrasted with the more aggressive approach he's taken on some domestic issues, particularly immigration. But it fit into a broader trend of Trump moderating his fiery rhetoric on foreign policy. From China to NATO, the president has moved more cautiously than his campaign pronouncements suggested he might.

But Trump inserted himself into the Mideast peace process Wednesday by opening the door to negotiations not based on the two-state solution, which calls for a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel. The US has insisted on a two-state solution since the Clinton administration.

Trump cast the switch as an attempt to kindle new thinking. "I like the

[solution] that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like," he said in a press conference with Netanyahu Wednesday.

But Palestinians and Arab countries, including longtime US partners, have long insisted on a Palestinian state. Moreover, making Palestinian areas a part of Israel could threaten to make the Jewish population a minority. Saeb Erekat, chief negotiator for the Palestinians, said at a press conference Wednesday that a one-state solution raised the specter of "apartheid."

To some regional analysts, Trump's comment might be more of a gesture to Netanyahu, who faces pressures at home from his right flank, than a game-changer.

On other issues, Trump the president was notably more circumspect than Trump the candidate. Candidate Trump blasted the Iran nuclear deal and said he would "tear it up" once in office. He sounded like he would not object to construction of new settlements on Palestinian lands in the West Bank. And he vowed to quickly move the US embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

On the Iran nuclear deal? There was no tearing it up in Netanyahu's presence. Instead, there was a vow to never let Iran develop a nuclear weapon.

On settlements in the West Bank? Trump surprised Israel's pro-settler right wing with recent statements suggesting the US would not grant Israel free rein on settlement construction. He repeated that Wednesday, saying to Netanyahu: "I'd like to see you hold back on settlements for a little bit."

On moving the US embassy to Jerusalem? Trump has gone silent on something he earlier declared would be one of his first acts as president. On Wednesday, he said he was considering the issue "with great care."

The goal of establishing new warmth between the US and Israel could have important effects down the road. If that warmth translates to closer ties, it could factor into Trump administration policy.

"For Netanyahu, it's important that he's coming early, before policies are set in concrete," Mr. Makovsky says. The objective is to "try to

influence thinking here before there are these policy reviews."

Netanyahu's No. 1 topic

At his various meetings Wednesday, Netanyahu was expected to home in on one topic over and over again, analysts say.

"The prime minister will be coming with an agenda heavily focused on Iran," says Dennis Ross, an adviser on Middle East issues to both Democratic and Republican administrations and a co-founder of

the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "What he wants" and what he'll emphasize "is that more needs to be done to deter Iran."

Netanyahu won't expect the US to ditch the nuclear deal, because he knows he won't get that, Ambassador Ross says. His goal is to press Trump not just to firmly enforce the agreement, but to seek to renegotiate it to address one of Israel's key worries – the lifting of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program after 15 years.

The Syrian conflict was expected to be another key point of discussion, experts say, and there, too, Netanyahu's goal is to avoid empowering Iran. Netanyahu wants any US cooperation with Russia on Syria to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran. And Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters should be kept away from the Israeli-Syrian border.

That eye on Iran could include bringing in Sunni Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates in a more explicit way.

Up to now, the Israelis and Sunni Arabs have kept their contacts over confronting Iran or battling the Islamic State "pretty much under the radar," Makovsky says. The question, he adds, will be "how to convert that to more overt, over-the-table cooperation."



Cease-fire frays in Syria's south as rebels launch new offensive

By Louisa Loveluck

BEIRUT — A cease-fire brokered by Turkey and Russia two months ago is fraying along Syria's southern border as rebel forces launch their largest offensive in the area in more than a year.

Monitors, activists and an aid group said fighting between opposition and pro-government forces raged for a fourth day Wednesday in the southern city of Daraa, pushing the number of dead and wounded past 60.

A nationwide cease-fire has largely held since late December, when President Bashar al-Assad's forces recaptured the flash-point northern city of Aleppo. That victory brought what remained of the armed opposition to a crisis point, bolstering the hand of its Turkish backers to negotiate a truce with one of the Syrian government's staunchest allies, Russia.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Please provide a valid email address.

But rebel guns had been largely silent in southern Syria for more than a year, constrained by infighting and the directives of the forces' powerful Jordanian backers across the border.

[The strange and very cold city of Astana could be where Syria's war is solved]

In an unusual development for Syria's knotty conflict, the rebel offensive in Daraa appeared to have been launched without international support. The fighters began pushing through the southwestern district of Manshiyah on Sunday, detonating car bombs and at least one powerful tunnel bomb.

According to activists and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring network, the government has carried out intense airstrikes in response.

Medics said at least 25 people have been killed in the fighting, six of them from a single family. Thousands have fled the area, many seeking refuge on countryside farmland and in orchards.

The International Rescue Committee said a rocket attack late

Monday injured four health workers and caused major damage to a clinic it supported in Daraa's Balad district.

Amanda Catanzano, the organization's senior director for international policy and advocacy, warned that similar attacks in Aleppo and other cities preceded heavy fighting.

"It's distressing to see the strategies that resulted in so many civilian deaths in Aleppo begin to play out elsewhere in Syria," Catanzano said. "There can be no peace in Syria without accountability for these repeated attacks against civilians."

But activists defended the fighting, insisting that the rebel offensive would bring a much-needed "morale boost" ahead of peace talks scheduled for Feb. 23 in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana.

"This is a battle to bring spirit back to the opposition," said Ahmed Almasalma, a media activist from Daraa's western countryside.

[At Russia-led talks, Syrian rebels and government meet for the first time]

Although an earlier round of talks in Astana ended inconclusively,

negotiators hope that the new meetings will pave the way for a resumption of the Geneva peace process brokered by the United Nations.

Syria's conflict, almost six years old, has gone through several cycles of cease-fires broken by ferocious violence. But the latest truce is playing out in a dramatically altered military and diplomatic landscape.

Rebel forces mostly have been boxed into the northwestern province of Idlib. Internal tensions have boiled over into open war there, with hard-line factions allied with al-Qaeda coming out on top.

Pro-Assad forces hold all the most important urban centers in the country, and the president's departure is no longer a precondition for the rebels' participation in any peace process.

Zakaria Zakaria in Istanbul contributed to this report.



Holmas : The Cold War returns to the high seas

James Holmes is a professor at the Naval War College, co-author of "Red Star Over the Pacific," and a US Navy surface-warfare officer of Cold War vintage. The views expressed in this commentary are his own.

(CNN)The Russian Navy surveillance vessel SSV-175 Viktor Leonov is reportedly cruising international waters off the East Coast of the United States.

Ho, hum.

Viktor Leonov first appeared off Delaware and, at this writing, is loitering south of the US submarine base at Groton, Connecticut. The ship is undoubtedly vacuuming up

electronic signals emanating from the base, monitoring the US Navy's comings and goings and gleaning anything it can about the construction of new US submarines.

Beyond the immediate benefits of gathering intelligence, President Vladimir Putin's government is sending a specific message by dispatching Viktor Leonov to the western Atlantic Ocean. Just as the US Navy commonly deploys warships to seas that wash against Russian shores, in particular the Black Sea and Baltic Sea, the Russian Navy can reciprocate by mounting a presence of its own in US home waters.

In other words, two can play America's game.

It's worth remembering what a common maritime game this was during the Cold War. Ever since the US Navy sank the Imperial Japanese Navy in World War II, it has seen itself as the guardian of freedom of the seas and as the sharp edge of US foreign policy. At the height of the Cold War, US mariners mounted a standing presence in potentially embattled waters. Ships voyaged around the Eurasian periphery constantly, close to the Eastern Bloc shores.

Rather than submit meekly to American dominance of the world's oceans and seas, the Soviet Union

built an oceangoing fleet larger, albeit more technologically backward, than the US Navy fleet. By the 1970s, in fact, the Soviet Navy was active not just in the vicinity of Soviet coastlines but throughout the Seven Seas. This included American-dominated "lakes" like the Mediterranean Sea. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, for instance, the Soviet contingent in the Eastern Mediterranean outnumbered the Italy-based US Sixth Fleet -- and shocked US commanders in the process.

But such interactions became routine during the end of the Cold War. Each navy shadowed the other's ships and aircraft. Fleet commanders departing from, say,

Pearl Harbor, knew a Soviet "AGI" -- a fishing trawler packed with electronic snooping gear, and a forerunner to Viktor Leonov -- would be lurking offshore and would follow along to collect signals intelligence and information about American tactics and practices. Prudent US commanders took to assigning the AGI a station in the formation, lest it get in the way or cause a collision when the task force changed course or speed.

Soviet ships became de facto members of US fleets!

That's not to say high-seas interactions were always so cordial. Sometimes they were downright harrowing. US and Soviet

submariners played cat-and-mouse games with one another, and with adversary surface vessels, throughout the Cold War. Sometimes the two navies nearly came to blows, as during the "Black Sea bumping incident" of 1988, when two Soviet frigates deliberately collided with an American cruiser and destroyer skirting close to the Crimean Peninsula.

Mostly, though, Washington and Moscow managed their maritime interactions in the interest of preventing war. They concluded an Incidents at Sea Agreement designed to forestall escalation when US and Soviet ships encountered each other at sea. In short, each navy sought to deter the

other while grudgingly tolerating its presence in nearby seas.

For Americans, this is the price of a globe-spanning maritime strategy. US maritime strategy envisions stationing forces in proximity to potentially hostile shorelines. As a matter of reciprocity, Washington can hardly refuse Russian -- or Chinese, or Iranian -- fighting ships the right to approach American coasts, provided they comply with the rules set forth by the law of the sea. They may pass within 12 nautical miles of our shorelines while conducting "innocent passage."

And Viktor Leonov appears to be in compliance with this law.

The habit of tolerating rival navies' presence is a habit worth relearning. The post-Cold War age, the age when the US Navy was the undisputed master of the sea, is drawing swiftly to a close. Russia's navy is returning to the sea after a quarter-century when its ships sat rusting at their moorings. China has built a navy that's set to outnumber the US Navy within the foreseeable future.

Competition against rival navies is once again a fact. Americans and their elected officials had better get used to it.

**The
New York
Times**

Editorial : Time for Congress to Investigate Mr. Trump's Ties to Russia

In history, this is where Congress steps in. During the Vietnam War, Watergate and the Iran-contra scandal, when a president's actions or policies crossed the line, Congress investigated and held the White House to account. The time has come for it to do so again.

In the last week alone, Americans have witnessed the firing of President Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, and learned with shock and incredulity that members of Mr. Trump's campaign and inner circle were in repeated contact with Russian intelligence officials.

Coming on top of credible information from America's intelligence agencies that Russia tried to destabilize and influence the 2016 presidential campaign, these latest revelations are more than sufficient reason for Congress to investigate what Moscow has been up to and whether people at the highest levels of the United States government have aided and abetted

the interests of a nation that has tried to thwart American foreign policy since the Cold War.

Given that context, one might expect Mr. Trump to be clamoring for details that would eliminate any suspicion that his administration is in league with an enemy. Instead he has waged an unhinged attack on the intelligence agencies themselves, praising President Vladimir Putin of Russia at every turn and pointing fingers everywhere but at himself, while refusing to take a single step to resolve questions about his administration's ties to Russia.

Hence the urgent need for high-level congressional intervention. The ideal vehicle would be an investigative committee of senior senators from both parties as well as members of the House. Some Senate Republicans are beginning to step up. Senator Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has already said his committee will investigate the election hacking. Chuck Grassley,

chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Dianne Feinstein, the panel's top-ranking Democrat, are asking for a briefing and transcripts of Mr. Flynn's calls to the Russian ambassador.

Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Pat Roberts favor a broader investigation. John Cornyn, the Senate majority whip, has also raised the possibility of an investigation by Senate committees with jurisdiction over the intelligence community.

The Democrats would obviously be on board — Chuck Schumer, the Senate Democratic leader, has also called for the Senate Intelligence Committee to lead a bipartisan inquiry. The person who needs to make this happen is Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader. Whatever form the committee takes, as Mr. Schumer said on Wednesday, all members must be granted equal access to "intelligence officials, transcripts and documents that they need to answer critical questions, and they must be

permitted to make their findings public to the maximum extent possible."

Admittedly, this is hoping for a lot from a Republican leadership whose natural inclination is to protect the president. This week, for instance, congressional Republicans closed off one avenue to forcing the release of Mr. Trump's tax returns, which he has refused to divulge and which could help prove to Americans that he is not indebted to Russian financial entities. (It bears repeating, in this regard, that Mr. Trump didn't fire Mr. Flynn this week for chummily discussing American sanctions on Russia with Moscow's ambassador, or for lying about it. Mr. Trump knew all that for weeks. He fired Mr. Flynn after both of them got caught.)

With or without the administration's cooperation, Congress's plain and urgent duty, lest it be judged complicit, is to get to the bottom of this crisis.

**The
New York
Times**

Kristof : What Did Trump Know, and When Did He Know It?

Nicholas Kristof

Second, the dossier prepared by a former MI6 Russia expert outlines collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. CNN reports that American intelligence has communications intercepts corroborating elements of the dossier, and the latest revelation of repeated and constant contacts between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign give additional weight to the dossier's allegations — although it's also important to note that officials told The Times that they had seen no evidence of such cooperation in election manipulation.

Third, President Trump has been mystifyingly friendly toward Russia and President Vladimir Putin. As Jeffrey H. Smith, a former general counsel to the C.I.A., puts it: "The bigger issue here is why Trump and people around him take such a radically different view of Russia than has been the case for decades. We don't know the answer to that."

Fourth, Flynn, before taking office, discussed Obama administration sanctions on Russia with the Russian ambassador. Flynn has now resigned, but he was steeped in the principle of a chain of command; I doubt he made these calls completely on his own. Daniel

Benjamin, a former counterterrorism coordinator at the State Department who has known Flynn for years, says it would have been out of character for Flynn to do so. So who told Flynn to make these calls? Steve Bannon? Trump himself?

We're back to our question: What did the president know, and when did he know it?

The White House hasn't responded to my inquiries, and Trump lashes out wildly at "the fake news media" without answering questions. He reminds me of Nixon, who in 1974 said Watergate "would have been a blip" if it weren't for journalists "who

hate my guts." Soon afterward, Nixon resigned.

Trump supporters say that the real scandal here is leaks that make the administration look bad. A bit hypocritical? It's dizzying to see a president who celebrated the hacking of his rival's campaign emails suddenly evince alarm about leaks.

Sure, leaks are always a concern, but they pale beside the larger issues of the integrity of our leaders and our elections. Published reports have quoted people in the intelligence community as fearing that information given to the White

House will end up in Russian hands, even that the "Kremlin has ears" in the White House Situation Room.

I referred to Trump last year as "the Russian poodle," and we've known for years of Trump's financial ties to Russia, with his son Donald Jr. saying in 2008, "We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia." It's all the more important now that Trump release his

tax returns so that we can understand any financial leverage Russia has over him. Yet the same Republicans who oversaw eight investigations of Benghazi shrug at far greater concerns involving Trump and Russia.

"I'm just appalled at how little people seem to care about the fact that Russians interfered in our presidential election, clearly,

unequivocally, on the part of one candidate," Michael McFaul, a former ambassador to Russia, told me. "What's more important than that?" To which I add: Only one thing could be more important — if the Russians had help from within the U.S.

As I said, there's a great deal we don't know. But we urgently need a bipartisan investigation, ideally an

independent panel modeled on the 9/11 Commission. It must address what is now the central question: "What did the president know, and when did he know it?"

Los
Angeles
Times

Boot : Kremlingate: What did President Trump know and when did he know it?

Max Boot

Michael Flynn's departure as national security advisor highlights the troubling and mysterious ties between President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

We know that Trump is the most pro-Russian president in American history. He regularly praises Putin and dismisses well-founded charges that the Russian strongman murders innocent people. "There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers," the president recently told Bill O'Reilly. "What, you think our country is so innocent?"

From Our Partners: Republicans Have a Warning for President Trump: Don't Play Nice With Russia

We know, too, that Putin's intelligence agencies ran a hacking operation last year designed to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Trump. On Jan. 6, the U.S. intelligence community released a "high-confidence" report that makes untenable Trump's repeated claims that the hacking could have been done by a random 400-pound couch potato.

What we don't know is this: What are the links, if any, between Trump and Putin? Is Trump merely an admirer of Putin's (which is troubling enough), or does Putin actually have something on Trump that would cause the president to act in ways contrary to American interests?

Some curious connections between the Trump camp and the Kremlin already have come to light. Last summer, lobbyist

Paul Manafort was fired as Trump's campaign manager after ledgers were discovered in Kiev showing millions of dollars in cash payments to him from Ukraine's Russian-backed strongman, Viktor Yanukovich. Another fired campaign advisor, Carter Page, was close to the Kremlin's state-owned oil industry. Now, Flynn has departed his White House post after all of three weeks on the job when it emerged that he had carried on secret conversations prior to the inauguration with Sergei Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to Washington. Flynn had at least one other connection to the Kremlin, having gone to Moscow in December 2015 as a paid guest to attend a dinner alongside Putin honoring the Russian propaganda outlet RT.

Flynn was undone because he subsequently lied about his conversations with Kislyak to Vice President Pence. But we now know, thanks to the Washington Post, that the Justice Department had notified the White House three weeks ago that Flynn was opening himself up to blackmail by lying about the phone call, which had been monitored by U.S. intelligence. The White House did not act on that information until it was leaked last week, and it is not clear whether anything would have been done if the information hadn't become public.

It is also unclear whether Trump knew at the time about Flynn's backdoor contacts with the Russians, but circumstantial evidence points that way. The

widespread assumption is that Flynn relayed a message to Putin on Dec. 29 not to worry about President Obama's imposition of sanctions to punish Russia for its meddling in our election, suggesting that they would be lifted once Trump took office, perhaps as payback for the help that the Kremlin gave to Trump's campaign. When Putin got the hint and did not retaliate, Trump tweeted on Dec. 30: "Great move on delay (by V. Putin) - I always knew he was very smart!"

From the outside, it certainly looks as if both Flynn and Trump might have been colluding to undermine U.S. foreign policy while Obama was still in office, much as Richard Nixon did in the fall of 1968 by secretly sabotaging Lyndon Johnson's attempts to open peace talks with Hanoi. This is no Watergate, at least not yet, but it is imperative to ask the Watergate question: What did the president know, and when did he know it?

There are other questions that Trump and his aides should be asked as well. We have learned recently, courtesy of CNN, that U.S. intelligence has corroborated at least some parts of the 35-page dossier compiled by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele in which he claimed that Trump was subject to Kremlin blackmail on sexual and financial grounds. While it may be impossible to embarrass Trump for sexual misdeeds after his taped confession of groping, there could well be shady financial dealings in his past

that help to explain why he refuses to release his tax returns.

It is certainly curious that Trump has repeatedly denied any financial links to Russia ("I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH RUSSIA—NO DEALS, NO LOANS, NO NOTHING," he tweeted on Jan. 11), and yet the public record reflects that he staged the Miss Universe pageant in Moscow in 2013 and tried to conduct numerous other deals there. His son Donald Trump Jr. bragged in 2008 that their company had "a lot of money pouring in from Russia."

The American public deserves to know more — a lot more — about what ties, if any, our president may have with a hostile foreign power. Media reporting is insufficient because reporters cannot subpoena documents or force testimony under penalty of perjury. The Republican-run Congress does have that authority but so far has not chosen to exercise it. The only way we are likely ever to get to the bottom of Kremlingate is through the appointment of a bipartisan, 9/11-style commission.

It is scandalous that Republicans so far have blocked such a move; they are putting partisan considerations above the interests of the country. Perhaps now the stonewall will finally crumble? Flynn's resignation should not be the end of the story.

Max Boot is a contributing writer to Opinion and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL

North Korean Dictator Ordered Brother Killed, South Korean Spy Chief Says

Kwanwoo Jun in Seoul, Alastair Gale in Tokyo and Ben Otto in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Updated Feb. 15, 2017 11:35 a.m. ET

North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un issued an assassination order on his half brother after seizing power in 2011 and agents tried to kill him at

least once before succeeding this week, South Korea's spy chief said.

National Intelligence Service Director Lee Byung-ho's statement to South Korean lawmakers in a closed-door session on Wednesday came as Malaysia arrested a suspect in the mysterious airport

killing this week of the brother, Kim Jong Nam.

"The longstanding order has been executed," said Lee Cheol-woo, who heads the South Korean legislature's intelligence committee, which oversees the spy agency, according to an aide to the lawmaker. "It reflects Kim Jong Un's

propensity for paranoia, rather than his calculated act of removing a threat to his rule."

South Korea's spy agency sometimes errs in its assessments of developments inside North Korea, one of the world's most closed societies. But often it has been proved correct.

Malaysian police said they apprehended a woman at Kuala Lumpur International Airport holding a Vietnamese passport as they searched for two women they said had fatally attacked Kim Jong Nam on Monday with a poison-tinged cloth. The assault lasted about 15 seconds, a Malaysian official said.

Mr. Kim died while en route to a hospital. Malaysian officials said they declined a request by North Korea to turn over the remains without a postmortem.

The late Mr. Kim had a wife and son in Beijing and another wife with two children in Macau, Mr. Lee, the spy chief, said. Kim Jong Nam's families have long been placed under Chinese protection, he told lawmakers. China's Foreign Ministry declined to comment on that statement.

Mr. Lee said Kim Jong Nam, who had advocated reforms in North Korea, sent a letter to Kim Jong Un in April, 2012, to ask for mercy, according to the aide. The spy chief said that Kim Jong Nam wrote in the letter that he and his family had "nowhere to run and hide" and no other option left but to "commit suicide to escape."

The spy chief said Kim Jong Nam hadn't attempted to seek asylum in South Korea and he was unaware of any attempts to expel Kim Jong Un and enthrone Kim Jong Nam in North Korea, saying the elder brother has had no solid support in the tightly controlled state.

Kim Jong Nam's demise stands in

contrast to the life of power and privilege he was once destined to lead as the heir apparent to Kim Jong Il, North Korea's second-generation dictator.

"Later, when you grow up, this is where you'll sit and give orders," the father told a young Kim Jong Nam as he sat in his father's chair in his Pyongyang office, according to a 1996 book by Lee Il Nam, the nephew of a former wife of Kim Jong Il. Mr. Lee was shot and killed by a North Korean agent in 1997.

Kim Jong Nam fell out of favor in 2001 after trying to pass through a Tokyo airport on a fake passport—he said he planned to visit Disneyland. He was deported to China.

In his place, Kim Jong Un rose to rule North Korea, and has been brutal in his efforts to consolidate power. He has purged over 100 senior officials since taking power at the end of 2011, South Korean intelligence authorities estimate, including the execution of his uncle in 2013.

A new campaign this year in North Korea seeks to idolize dictator Kim Jong Un. "By eliminating this dissenting voice, North Korean officials can show Kim Jong Un progress," said Park Syung-je, a North Korea analyst at the Asia Strategy Institute in Seoul.

Kim Jong Nam was born in 1971, the product of an affair between Kim Jong Il and a North Korean movie star. A memoir written by his maternal aunt and nurse recalls Kim

Jong Il doting on his son. Kim Jong Nam attended schools in Russia and Switzerland before returning to North Korea in 1988.

Intelligence analysts give various accounts of Kim Jong Nam's role in the regime as a young man. As his father sought to modernize North Korea's communications facilities, he was given a top position in developing the information technology sector, often traveling to countries around Asia, according to some experts.

Others say he was involved in sales of North Korean missiles and other weapons, as well as money laundering and the distribution of counterfeit currency for the regime.

His fortunes began shifting with the ill-fated visit to Japan in 2001. After that, he remained in China most of the time, where he appears to have developed a more carefree lifestyle, spending more time gambling and drinking. He remained in touch with his father, talking occasionally by phone, he said in a book published in 2012 with a Japanese journalist.

In 2008, when Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke, Kim Jong Nam arranged for a French neurosurgeon to travel to Pyongyang to treat his father.

Kim Jong Nam likely managed some of the regime's funds from China, using part of them to fund his own lifestyle, said Michael Madden, a U.S.-based expert on the North Korean leadership. Kim Jong Nam told the Japanese journalist he made investments to make a living.

Kim Jong Nam eventually gravitated to the Chinese gambling hub of Macau. There, he mostly eluded persistent approaches by Japanese journalists, brushing them off with a few dismissive words of English. TV footage highlighted his fashion choices; luxury brands such as Armani and Ralph Lauren, as well as an array of designer glasses.

In a sign Kim Jong Nam had fallen from the Pyongyang power orbit, he wasn't shown or named in reports from Kim Jong Il's funeral in December 2011.

The Japanese journalist, Yoji Gomi, reported that Kim Jong Nam kept up with North Korea politics and drank heavily. When the book was published in early 2012, Kim Jong Nam's opposition to his half brother was spelled out. "It is questionable how a hereditary successor who has been through [successor] training for only about two years can take over the absolute authority that has continued for 37 years," he wrote.

In October of that year, a North Korean agent arrested in South Korea said he had been ordered to kidnap Kim Jong Nam in China.

China still viewed Kim Jong Nam as a backup ruler, said Nam Sung-wook, a Korea University professor who previously led a research arm with Seoul's main spy agency. For Kim Jong Un, Mr. Nam said, "such an alternative is something that should be removed so that Beijing can always do its best to stop chaos in North Korea under his rule."

The New York Times

Paddock

SEOUL, South Korea — When North Korea held a state funeral for its leader, Kim Jong-il, in 2011, one son was conspicuously absent.

The absence of Kim Jong-nam — the eldest son of the family, who was bound by Korean tradition to preside over the funeral — was all the evidence outside analysts needed to see how isolated he had become from the center of power in North Korea, the world's most secretive regime.

Never fully accepted by his family, sidelined by his powerful stepmother and haunted by fears of assassins, Mr. Kim lived much of his life wandering abroad, in Moscow, Geneva, Beijing, Paris and Macau, the Chinese gambling enclave.

On Monday, Mr. Kim, 45, met his end at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia. According to the National Intelligence Service of

Kim Jong-nam, the Hunted Heir to a Dictator Who Met Death in Exile

Choe Sang-Hun and Richard C.

South Korea, he was poisoned by two women who appeared to be carrying out an assassination order from Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. Mr. Kim died on his way to the hospital. Two women have been detained in connection with the killing.

It remains uncertain if Mr. Kim was traveling alone or if bodyguards were present. It was also unclear how many people were involved in the attack.

Grainy footage released on Wednesday showed a woman suspected of being one of the assassins, who appeared to be of Asian descent and wore a shirt emblazoned with "LOL" in large letters, before she fled the airport.

The Royal Malaysia Police announced late Wednesday afternoon that they had arrested a woman that morning and that she had been carrying a Vietnamese passport in Terminal 2, where the attack occurred. They said she was

"positively identified" from closed-circuit video, and was alone at the time of her arrest.

She was identified as Doan Thin Hoang, 28, according to the inspector general of the police, Khalid Abu Bakar.

On Thursday, the Malaysian police said they had detained a second suspect, a woman with an Indonesian passport. A police official told the Bernama news agency that more arrests were expected.

The authorities also said that an autopsy on Mr. Kim had been completed.

There were no markers or police tape at Terminal 2 on Wednesday to indicate that a crime had been committed. Airport workers said that they had been ordered not to discuss the case.

South Korea's acting president, Hwang Kyo-ahn, said on Wednesday that his government was working with the Malaysian

authorities to find the assailants. But officials in Seoul quickly pointed fingers at Mr. Kim's half brother, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who has ordered the executions of a number of senior officials, including his own uncle, who have been deemed potential challenges to his authority.

Ever since Kim Jong-un succeeded his father in 2011, "there has been a standing order" to assassinate his half brother, Lee Byung-ho, the director of the South's National Intelligence Service, said during a closed-door briefing at the National Assembly, according to lawmakers who attended it.

"This is not a calculated action to remove Kim Jong-nam because he was a challenge to power per se, but rather reflected Kim Jong-un's paranoia," Mr. Lee was quoted as saying.

Kim Jong-un wanted his half brother killed, Mr. Lee said, and there was an assassination attempt against

him in 2012. Mr. Kim was so afraid of assassins that he begged for his life in a letter to his half brother in 2012.

"Please withdraw the order to punish me and my family," Mr. Kim was quoted as saying in the letter. "We have nowhere to hide. The only way to escape is to choose suicide."

Mr. Lee said that Kim Jong-nam had no power base inside North Korea, where Kim Jong-un had swiftly established his monolithic rule with what the South called a reign of terror.

Kim Jong-nam arrived in Malaysia last week, Mr. Lee said. He was in line at the airport to check in for a flight to Macau on Monday morning when he was attacked by the two women, Mr. Lee said, citing security camera footage from the airport. The women fled the airport in a taxi, Mr. Lee said.

If North Korea's involvement is proved, Washington could face intense pressure to put the country back on its list of nations that sponsor terrorism, said Cheong Seong-chang, an analyst at the Sejong Institute, a think tank in South Korea.

North Korea was first put on the terrorism list after the South caught a woman from the North who confessed to planting a bomb on a South Korean airliner that exploded over the Indian Ocean, near Myanmar, in 1987. The North was taken off the list in 2008, after a deal aimed at ending its nuclear program.

South Korea's military plans to use loudspeakers along the shared Korean border to inform North Koreans of Mr. Kim's killing and of their government's brutality, a South Korean news agency, Yonhap, reported on Wednesday. The Defense Ministry declined to confirm

the report.

"By assassinating Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-un may have removed a thorn in the side, but it will further isolate his country," Mr. Cheong said. "It is also expected to worsen his country's relations with China, which has been protecting his brother."

Kim Jong-nam's life illuminates the hidden intrigue in the Kim family, which has ruled North Korea for almost seven decades.

While the lives of the rest of the family remained shrouded in mystery, Mr. Kim, the oldest of three known sons of Kim Jong-il, has been the closest thing the isolated Stalinist state has had to an international playboy.

He was often seen with fashionably dressed women in international airports and spent much of his time in casinos in Macau, where he also kept an expensive house.

Outside analysts often saw him as a possible candidate to replace Kim Jong-un if the North Korean leadership imploded and China, traditionally an ally, sought a replacement in its client state.

Chinese experts on North Korea said they doubted that Kim Jong-nam had special security protection from Beijing.

"Chinese elites had no expectation this guy could play an important political role," said Cheng Xiaohu, an associate professor of international relations at Renmin University. "If China wanted to use him as an alternative leader, China would have offered good protection, but this assassination shows he had no security protection."

In Macau, where Mr. Kim was headed, he was safe just by being there, said Zhang Baohui, director of

the Center for Asian Pacific Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. "Macau is part of China and is a safe haven in itself," he said.

Mr. Kim was a prince in exile with little chance of returning home, analysts and officials in South Korea said. His wife and a daughter and son are in Macau under Chinese protection, Mr. Lee said.

The South Korean intelligence agency did not disclose how it had obtained the letter from Mr. Kim begging his half brother to spare his life. But government sources said that emails Mr. Kim sent home through North Korean embassies had been obtained in a hacking operation. In one of the emails, they said, Mr. Kim bitterly complained that the North Korean government stopped sending him cash after his father died and Kim Jong-un took over. In 2012, a news report said Mr. Kim was thrown out of a luxury Macau hotel, unable to pay a \$15,000 bill.

The Kim family has never been known for its togetherness.

Kim Jong-nam's mother, Sung Hae-rim, a decorated "people's actress," was already married and the mother of a child when Kim Jong-il forced her to divorce her novelist husband to marry him. Kim Jong-il adored his first son, Kim Jong-nam. He once seated his young son at his desk and told him, "This is the place where you will one day give orders," according to Lee Han-young, a relative who defected to the South in 1982.

But Kim Jong-nam's grandfather, the North's founding president, Kim Il-sung, never approved of the marriage.

"My father was keeping highly secret the fact that he was living with my mother, who was married, a famous

movie actress, so I couldn't get out of the house or make friends," Mr. Kim was quoted as saying in a 2012 book by a Japanese journalist. "That solitude from childhood may have made me what I am now, preferring freedom."

Mr. Kim was born in secret, and when his mother fell out of favor with Kim Jong-il and was forced to live in Moscow, he was left in the care of her sister. He was later sent to Geneva, where he learned English and French. (His mother was alone in Moscow when she died in 2002.)

Kim Jong-il would later begin a relationship with Ko Young-hee, a star of Pyongyang's premier opera, who gave birth to Kim Jong-chol and then Kim Jong-un. According to a Japanese sushi chef who published a 2003 memoir about his experience working for the Kim family, Kim Jong-un was by that time the father's favorite.

Kim Jong-nam squandered what little chance he may have had to succeed his father when he embarrassed Pyongyang in 2001; he was caught trying to enter Japan on a fake passport from the Dominican Republic. He told Japanese investigators that he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

But rumors of intrigue never left Mr. Kim, as analysts speculated that if the young, inexperienced Kim Jong-un failed to meet the expectations of hard-line generals, they might summon home the eldest brother. In a way, Mr. Kim helped fuel such rumors.

In the 2012 book by the Japanese journalist, Mr. Kim called his younger brother "a figurehead."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Killing of Kim Jong Un's Brother Intrigues North Korea's Estranged Ally China

Chun Han Wong and Charles Hutzler

Feb. 15, 2017 3:46 a.m. ET

BEIJING—The killing in a Malaysian airport of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un's half brother, who spent time both in Beijing and the Chinese territory of Macau, stirred a flurry of speculation among China's social-media users and a muted official reaction.

The brother, Kim Jong Nam, was killed on Monday under mysterious circumstances at the airport outside Kuala Lumpur, said South Korea's government and Malaysian police. Many observers believe that China,

North Korea's closest ally, sheltered the brother, partly to ensure the safety of a potential bargaining chip with Pyongyang.

A spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry offered a terse response when asked about Mr. Kim's death. "We noted the relevant media reports," Geng Shuang said Wednesday at a regular news briefing. "We are following the developments." Most Chinese state-run media limited their coverage to simply reporting his death, spurning speculation about potential masterminds and motives behind the reported killing.

China has come under growing U.S. pressure to help dissuade North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal. Pyongyang tested another ballistic missile last weekend.

"For China, relations with North Korea are fairly sensitive, especially in the current climate, so there's no reason for China to wade into this incident, at least until more facts surface," said Wang Sheng, a North Korea scholar at China's Jilin University.

A popular social-media account run by the Communist Party's flagship newspaper, People's Daily, sought to play down the potential impact on China stemming from Mr. Kim's

death, saying it would make little difference to currently tense situation on the Korean Peninsula.

"Let's say we take ten thousand steps back and assume that Kim Jong Nam was indeed assassinated by North Korea, how much would it affect the situation on the Korean Peninsula?" said the WeChat social-media account, named Xiakedao, which means Chivalrous Swordsman Island. "It only adds incremental value to everyone's understanding of North Korea, and doesn't represent substantive change."

After fighting together in the Korean War in the early 1950s, North Korea

and China remained, in the Chinese saying, "as close as lips and teeth" for decades. Their relations have become increasingly estranged as China opened up, engaged in market-style reforms and prospered while North Korea fell into isolation and pursued nuclear and missile programs that have unsettled the region, including Beijing.

Since falling out of favor with his father, Kim Jong Il, in the early 2000s, Mr. Kim has spent time living in China, including in Beijing and the Chinese territory of Macau, a former Portuguese colony turned gambling hub, according to a book written by Yoji Gomi, a Japanese journalist who has interviewed Mr. Kim.

Mr. Kim had said he was constantly watched in Beijing, but wasn't sure if it's to protect him or to monitor his movements, according to Mr. Gomi's book. Such surveillance was a reason why Mr. Kim preferred to live in Macau, which "suits him better" because "it's free and he likes to live with great freedom," Mr. Gomi said.

In 2007, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported that Mr. Kim had spent long periods living in five-star hotels in Macau, while his family lived in a villa. "He has often been spotted dining and drinking in Macau restaurants and gambling in casinos and on slot machines," the newspaper said at the time, citing unnamed sources.

Mr. Kim may have chosen to live to

China as a way to avoid antagonizing his family, unlike many North Korean defectors who move to South Korea or the U.S., which Pyongyang considers hostile nations, said Cheng Xiaohu, associate professor of international politics at Renmin University in Beijing.

China, for its part, appears to have tolerated Mr. Kim's presence as a courtesy to Pyongyang, according to Mr. Cheng. "The idea that China could use Kim Jong Nam as a trump card against Pyongyang is rather unlikely, given that he has renounced any interest in politics," the professor said. "From North Korea's perspective, if Kim Jong Nam was to live in exile, the best place for him to do so was China."

Pyongyang has sent teams of people into China previously to confront defectors. When Hwang Jang Yop, a high-ranking North Korean politician, fled to the South Korean Embassy in Beijing to defect in 1997, North Korea sent more than 200 people to China's capital to stop him, either by assassination or other means, said Cui Ying-jiu, a retired professor of Korean languages at Peking University.

They didn't succeed. Beijing increased security around Mr. Hwang and let him defect to South Korea. He died there of apparent natural causes in 2010.

"They wanted to forcibly remove him to prevent him from leaving for

South Korea," said Mr. Cui, a former student of Mr. Hwang's at Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang in the early 1960s.

Among Mr. Cui's schoolmates was Kim Jong Il, and the two men, Mr. Cui said, kept in intermittent contact over the following decades. Still, he didn't know that Kim Jong Nam was the North Korean leader's son until news reports identified the younger Mr. Kim trying to use a false passport to visit Disneyland in Japan in 2001.

Though Mr. Cui said he didn't have independent knowledge of the Chinese government's alleged protective custody of Kim Jong Nam, he said South Korean reports that date the protection to 2012 make sense. Around that time, Mr. Kim's half-brother, Kim Jong Un, was beginning a ruthless consolidation of power that included the 2013 execution of his uncle Jang Song Thaek.

"Hwang Jang Yop, Kim Jong Nam and Jang Song Thaek were all relatively open-minded to reforms," Mr. Cui said.

Despite Kim Jong Nam's ties to China, Chinese experts play down Mr. Kim's relevance to Chinese-North Korean ties. Experts believe Mr. Kim has largely stayed away from his country since the early 2000s.

"Kim Jong Nam departed from high-level North Korean politics so long ago that his influence there has

diminished to virtually nothing," said Mr. Wang, the Jilin University professor.

Mr. Kim's death might provide the U.S. with propaganda material against North Korea, but wouldn't have much impact on Beijing's ties with Pyongyang, according to Mr. Wang.

On Chinese social-media, many users speculated that Mr. Kim was assassinated on the orders of his younger half-brother and incumbent North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, who may have seen him as a potential rival or irritant.

On the popular Weibo microblogging service, the older Mr. Kim's death was often discussed in sardonic tones that feature dark humor.

"The relatives of the deceased are currently very calm," a Weibo user wrote, in a comment that drew more than 10,000 likes. Another user joked that Mr. Kim may have been assassinated because of a linguistic mix-up.

"Mole: Big brother is getting ready to board the plane. Fat Kim: No way in hell can we let him ascend the throne," the second user wrote, referring to Kim Jong Un by a nickname widely used in China. In Chinese, "board the plane" and "ascend the throne" are homonyms.

The Washington Post

Malaysian airport assassination focuses new attention on North Korean leader (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/annafifiel>
d

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Terminal 2 at Kuala Lumpur - International Airport was convulsing with its usual Monday morning chaos. Passengers were crowding around self-check-in kiosks for no-frills flights to Bali and Cebu and Da Nang, cramming belongings into their carry-ons.

One of those navigating the cavernous white terminal was a rotund Asian man traveling alone, checking in for a flight to Macau after a week in Malaysia.

The nearby Starbucks was full of people camped out waiting for their flights, and the noise was so loud that the workers at the cafe selling Malaysian soup and noodles did not notice anything amiss just a few yards away.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Please provide a valid email address.

There, near a counter in the check-in area, the man was suddenly set upon by two attractive young women who looked like any other travelers heading off on vacation. One was wearing a white sweater emblazoned with "LOL" and a short flowery skirt, her lips painted dark red and her hair cut in a femme-fatale bob.

What followed was an assassination that, complete with a honey trap and a public poisoning, has focused new attention on Kim Jong Un, the 33-year-old leader of North Korea, suggesting he will stop at nothing to keep power.

(Reuters)

An image from closed-circuit television shows a woman, left, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport who was later arrested by police

investigating the death of Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. South Korea's spy agency suspects two female North Korean agents assassinated Kim. South Korea intelligence suspects two female North Korean agents killed Kim Jong Nam (Reuters)

For the victim was his older half brother, Kim Jong Nam, traveling on an apparently fake passport that said he was a 46-year-old named Kim Chol. It was an attack that South Korea's spy chief asserted was directly ordered from the North Korean capital, Pyongyang.

[N. Korean leader's half brother killed in Malaysia in possible poison attack, police say]

One of the women grabbed the man as the other sprayed liquid on his face and held a cloth over it for about 10 seconds.

In the hullabaloo of the check-in area, no one even seemed to notice.

This account of the attack and its aftermath was pieced together from interviews with staff at the airport, police and other official statements, and leaks to the local media.

The women left swiftly, but not that swiftly. They went down three sets of escalators, past an H&M and a Baskin-Robbins, and out of the terminal to a taxi stand, where they needed to buy a voucher for their journey before lining up for a cab. They got in and told the driver to take them to the Empire Hotel, some 40 minutes from the airport.

Where are you from, the driver asked. Vietnam, the women responded.

Inside the terminal, Kim Jong Nam, feeling dizzy and apparently unable to see, stumbled to one of the counters to seek help. He was taken to a medical clinic inside the terminal, where he had a mild seizure, then was loaded into an ambulance.

He didn't make it to the hospital. He died en route. And Malaysian officials soon discovered the real identity of the man who had been living in a kind of exile for the past 15 years.

[Who was Kim Jong Nam?]

This was not first attempt on Kim Jong Nam's life. Five years ago, when he took power, Kim Jong Un issued a "standing order" to have his half brother assassinated, South Korean spy chief Lee Byung-ho told lawmakers in Seoul on Wednesday.

"It was a command that had to be pulled off no matter what," Lee said, according to some of the lawmakers. "Their spy agency had consistently been preparing for the killing, and it just turned out to have been accomplished this time."

One attempt, in 2012, prompted Kim Jong Nam to send a letter to his younger brother pleading with him to "spare me and my family," lawmakers were told.

This week's successful attack bore many of the hallmarks of other assassinations and attempts blamed

on North Korea, including a foiled 2011 plot to kill a North Korean defector at a Seoul subway station with a poison needle hidden in a Parker pen.

Two days after the attack, just after 8 a.m. on Wednesday morning, a woman was arrested at the airport — in the same terminal where the attack took place — and positively identified as one of the suspects. She was traveling on a Vietnamese passport identifying her as 29-year-old Doan Thi Hoang, police said.

[Police arrest third suspect in Kim Jong Nam killing]

North Koreans have been caught traveling on Southeast Asian passports before, making it entirely possible that the woman is, in fact, North Korean.

Police said that she was traveling alone and had told them she was tricked into the attack, which she had been told was just a prank. On Thursday morning, police arrested a second woman but were looking for four men thought to have been involved.

As all this was happening at the airport, Kim Jong Nam's body was being transferred in a white van, escorted by four police vehicles carrying officers with automatic weapons, from Putrajaya Hospital to Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, where an autopsy was scheduled.

Black sedans bearing North Korean diplomatic plates pulled up outside the general hospital, and the North Korean ambassador to Malaysia, Kang Chol, emerged from one. He refused to speak to reporters.

[A not-that-short history of North Korean assassinations and attempts]

Police said the North Korean diplomats had tried to stop the autopsy, insisting that the body be released to them.

The police refused. The autopsy was finished by Wednesday night, but the results were not immediately released. A Malaysian police official told local reporters only that the poison was "more potent than cyanide" but declined to say what exactly it was.

Shortly after 8 p.m., four North Korean cars sped out of the hospital grounds, one driven by a visibly upset young man in his 20s wearing a pink T-shirt — perhaps Kim Han Sol, the most visible of Kim Jong Nam's six children.

But there was no such frenzy in Pyongyang, where the regime has been preparing to celebrate the birthday Thursday of Kim Jong Un's late father, Kim Jong Il, an anniversary officially known in North Korea as the Day of the Shining Star.

The central squares have been cleared of snow, and pictures of trams and computers are on display at an industrial art exhibition commemorating the anniversary. Floral baskets from as far as Africa and Ecuador have been laid at the foot of statues of Kim Jong Il and his father, Kim Il Sung, according to state media.

For North Korea, it is business as usual.



Editorial : A lesson on UN peacekeeping – from Haiti

The Christian Science Monitor

February 15, 2017 —The Trump administration promises big changes at the United Nations, especially in its peacekeeping missions, which are now in 16 countries. But before the United States moves too fast, it should take note of the news this week that UN forces in Haiti will likely be withdrawn soon, a result of progress in reducing violence on the Caribbean island.

The head of UN peacekeeping, Hervé Ladsous, said Haiti has made so much progress that he would recommend the Security Council pull out the nearly 5,000 multinational troops and police.

"Security is not perfect, but I think it is much better," he said. One sign of progress: A more professional police force was able to help keep a relative peace during an election in November that brought a new president, Jovenel Moïse, to power.

UN peacekeepers were sent to Haiti in 2004 following an uprising that toppled then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. They have been controversial, mainly for inadvertently introducing cholera. But they have also been important for a new approach at countering armed gangs and kidnappers.

Known as "community violence reduction," the approach has since been used in many other world

trouble spots. Rather than rely on "tough" policing, it looks first at ways to bring hope to each neighborhood, such as providing jobs or sports to at-risk youth and providing seed money for women to become entrepreneurs. One critical step is to confront gang members, offering them alternatives to their criminal activities — embracing rather than jailing them.

"By listening to their concerns and taking them seriously, by initiating community reconciliation and kick-starting seed projects, we gave these communities hope, opportunities for a fresh start, and positive incentives to work together to bring violence under control," explains Dmitry Titov, the UN

assistant secretary-general for Rule of Law and Security Institutions.

Haiti is not yet able to stand on its own without international support. It is still recovering from the devastation of a 2010 earthquake and a massive hurricane last year. And its legal and political systems will need foreign attention for years. But on security, it has not only made progress but given the world a model for reducing local violence. That's one UN reform worth keeping.

[Editor's note: An earlier version of this editorial had the wrong year for the earthquake in Haiti.]

ETATS-UNIS



Editorial : Is fear the Trump administration's immigration enforcement goal?

AS A candidate, Donald Trump pledged "zero tolerance for criminal aliens," a stance, stripped of its tough-guy rhetoric, that might not have represented too drastic a departure from President Barack Obama's prioritization of undocumented felons for deportation. Within days

of taking office, however, Mr. Trump issued an executive order that expanded the definition of criminality so broadly as to encompass virtually any undocumented immigrant charged with a crime or even suspected of having broken a law.

In sweeps by immigration agents across the country, the new administration seemed to be making good on Mr. Trump's threat by arresting more than 600 undocumented immigrants, most of them in metropolitan areas in a dozen or so states. While the actions by Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE) in themselves were not dissimilar to raids undertaken during the Obama administration — which in the 2012 fiscal year alone resulted in the deportation of more than 400,000 people — they unleashed a wave of anxiety in immigrant communities.

For good reason, they feel they are in the new president's crosshairs.

That anxiety was fed by reports, subsequently confirmed by ICE officials, that along with unauthorized immigrants who had committed serious crimes, others were caught in the dragnet if they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, lacking papers.

Read These Comments

The best conversations on The Washington Post

Please provide a valid email address.

In a conference call with reporters,

David Marin, a top ICE official in Los Angeles, justified the raids by saying that "dangerous criminals who should be deported are being released into our communities." At the same time, though, he cast doubt on his own assertion by acknowledging that about 40 of the roughly 160 undocumented immigrants detained by ICE agents in the Los Angeles area had been convicted not of felonies but of misdemeanors — and in a few cases had no criminal convictions at all. It's anyone's guess how those 40 count as "dangerous criminals who should be deported."

The president says he will hire 15,000 additional immigration

officers and Border Patrol agents, if Congress will pay for them, and advocates for undocumented immigrants are braced for more sweeps. Immigration courts, already so clogged that hearings are scheduled 18 months and more in advance, may face a fresh deluge of detainees.

It is sensible policy to target undocumented immigrants who are convicted felons, especially repeat offenders, for deportation. Gang members who have committed violent crimes, drug traffickers and others who represent a genuine threat to public safety should be found and sent packing, as they

were during the Obama administration.

It is hard to imagine what purpose is served by focusing on immigrants with clean records, unless instilling terror in immigrant communities is the goal. Of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants, most have been in this country for more than 15 years. Roughly 8 million of them are in the workforce. Large numbers have children, spouses and other relatives who are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. They are part of this country's fabric, and to deport them en masse is wrong.



Editorial : Trump's Immigration Raids Aren't the Problem

The Editors

By one measure, President Donald Trump's immigration policy is one-third as harsh as his predecessor's - but it has generated at least as much if not more controversy. This is unfortunate, both because this particular controversy is unjustified and because it distracts from bigger problems.

Federal agents made 680 arrests in a series of immigration raids last week, sparking shock and alarm among immigrant communities that mass deportations are in the offing. Yet that number was one-third of the 2,059 arrests of criminal aliens made during five days in March 2015 under President Barack Obama, who was criticized by immigration activists as the "deporter-in-chief." The question, as ever, is not so much what to do about criminals in the U.S. illegally, but what to do about the mostly innocent 11 million undocumented aliens in the U.S.

True, they also have broken the law, and are subject to removal. Yet no rational policy contemplates removing all of them. The expansive enforcement program that Trump has outlined promises to be impractical, divisive and counterproductive.

Immigration Reform

Obama's immigration policy focused on two goals: stopping new illegal border-crossings and targeting for deportation aliens convicted of criminal offenses. During his administration, record numbers of undocumented aliens were "removed" -- a formal process with greater legal consequences than being merely "returned" -- mostly at the border. Meanwhile, deportations from the U.S. interior, where undocumented immigrants were more settled in communities, dropped by some two-thirds from 2009 to 2015. Obama also backed away from his predecessor's controversial program to draft state

and local law enforcement officials to go after immigration offenders.

Apprehensions and Deportations

Source: Migration Policy Institute and Department of Homeland Security

Trump, in contrast, would hire 10,000 new agents to strengthen enforcement, reinstate the use of state and local law enforcement as immigration officials, and authorize sanctions against so-called sanctuary cities that have resisted such measures in the past. Although the executive order claims to prioritize the removal of criminals, it expands this definition past the breaking point -- including, for instance, anyone whom an immigration official deems "a risk to public safety or national security."

Aside from the question of whether this policy is feasible -- it would be expensive, and the Department of Homeland Security is having trouble filling its open slots now, never mind another 10,000 -- there is a deeper

problem: This executive order would make it harder to stop the kind of criminal conduct it describes. No undocumented immigrant has any incentive to cooperate with law enforcement if doing so exposes them to deportation.

Deportation raids make for lurid headlines that may please Trump's political base. But less theatrical measures would have far more dramatic effect. The single most effective way to reduce the illegal immigrant population, for example, would be to implement the E-Verify employment and biometric entry/exit tracking systems. The sooner Trump realizes this -- both the practical ways to enforce existing law and the realistic ways to bring about more effective policy -- the better off the country will be.

To contact the senior editor responsible for Bloomberg View's editorials: David Shipley at davidshipley@bloomberg.net.



Editorial : The nation needs answers, not deflections, on Russia and Trump

THE NEWS that members of President Trump's circle had repeated contacts with Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election, reported by the New York Times on Tuesday, might have been less concerning if the president had responded by explaining or condemning the contacts and accepting the need for an impartial investigation. Instead, on Wednesday morning, he dashed off a half-dozen tweets in which he curiously both denied the news and attacked the leakers who disclosed it. In so doing, he gave more cause for Republicans and Democrats to demand answers about his opaque and increasingly troubling ties with Moscow.

"The fake news media is going crazy with their conspiracy theories and blind hatred," Mr. Trump tweeted. "This Russian connection non-sense is merely an attempt to cover-up the many mistakes made in Hillary Clinton's losing campaign." Then he insisted, "The real scandal here is that classified information is illegally given out by 'intelligence' like candy. Very un-American!"

The emerging White House line that questions about a Trump campaign-Russia connection merely reflect a war by the intelligence community on the president makes little sense. In fact, the FBI, not some rogue spy agency, has taken the lead role in investigating contact with Russian

officials by associates of Mr. Trump. That would be the same agency whose questionable disclosures about its probes of Ms. Clinton's emails may have gained Mr. Trump the presidency. Moreover, those who are properly concerned about Mr. Trump's possible connections to the regime of Vladimir Putin are not mere Clinton dead-enders, but a growing and bipartisan list of senators.

National News Alerts

Major national and political news as it breaks.

Please provide a valid email address.

To be clear, there is still plenty the public does not know. The nature of the apparent communications remains murky. Direct evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with Russian officials to sway the election continues to be lacking. But even the scant details already reported challenge previous assurances from Mr. Trump that no one on his staff had contact with the Russians during the campaign. Notably, White House press secretary Sean Spicer echoed those claims from the lectern on Tuesday just before reports emerged suggesting otherwise. His credibility, like that of the White House as a whole, has been

shattered after less than four weeks on the job.

It is heartening to hear that the FBI has devoted significant resources to investigating any connections between Mr. Trump's circle and a foreign government committed to weakening the United States and its allies. Because he was so close to

the Trump campaign, Attorney General Jeff Sessions should recuse himself from any and all decisions relating to that investigation.

Still, the latest news, on the heels of the forced resignation of national security adviser Michael Flynn over contacts with the Russian

ambassador, underscores the dire need for a broader, bipartisan probe of Russia's election-year meddling. Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee insist that the panel is working diligently. But there may well be strong political pressure on Republicans to choke the investigation or to keep key findings

secret. Senior House Republicans, for example, still seem uninterested in seriously probing these issues. If congressional inquiries ultimately are derailed by politics, an independent commission must be empaneled.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Shane Harris and
Carol E. Lee

Spies Keep Intelligence From Donald Trump on Leak Concerns (UNE)

Updated Feb. 16, 2017 12:33 a.m. ET

U.S. intelligence officials have withheld sensitive intelligence from President Donald Trump because they are concerned it could be leaked or compromised, according to current and former officials familiar with the matter.

The officials' decision to keep information from Mr. Trump underscores the deep mistrust that has developed between the intelligence community and the president over his team's contacts with the Russian government, as well as the enmity he has shown toward U.S. spy agencies. On Wednesday, Mr. Trump accused the agencies of leaking information to undermine him.

In some of these cases of withheld information, officials have decided not to show Mr. Trump the sources and methods that the intelligence agencies use to collect information, the current and former officials said. Those sources and methods could include, for instance, the means that an agency uses to spy on a foreign government.

A White House official said: "There is nothing that leads us to believe that this is an accurate account of what is actually happening."

- Andy Puzder, Trump's Labor Pick, Withdraws

Andy Puzder withdrew himself from consideration to become Labor secretary after Republican support in the Senate disintegrated over personal issues that dogged the fast-food executive leading up to a planned confirmation hearing.

Click to Read Story

- Trump Drops Push for Two-State Solution in Mideast

President Donald Trump abandoned Washington's decades-old push for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, saying the two sides should determine for themselves whether separate states were necessary for peace.

Click to Read Story

- Advertisement
- Pence Finds Himself in Unusual Role in Flynn's Firing

Mike Pence showed his clout with the firing of Mike Flynn, but the vice president also was kept in the dark about Mr. Flynn's deceptions for two weeks in the White House's loose-knit power structure.

Click to Read Story

- Mike Flynn Is First Casualty of Turmoil in Trump Administration

President Donald Trump's nascent administration is being weighed down from within, sidetracked by dishonesty and potential ethical lapses inside the White House and questions about the strength of his leadership from fellow Republicans.

Click to Read Story

- One of Government's Largest Landlords Pays Millions Each Year to Trump Company

President Trump's company receives tens of millions of dollars a year from Vornado Realty Trust, which is vying for new work from the Trump administration.

Click to Read Story

- Advertisement
- Senate Majority Leader Takes on High-Wire Balancing Act

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, trying to manage an ambitious legislative agenda amid White House turmoil, aims to focus on shared goals with President Trump.

Click to Read Story

TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

A spokesman for the Office of Director of National Intelligence said: "Any suggestion that the U.S. intelligence community is withholding information and not providing the best possible intelligence to the president and his national security team is not true."

Intelligence officials have in the past not told a president or members of Congress about the ins and outs of how they ply their trade. At times, they have decided that secrecy is essential for protecting a source, and that all a president needs to know is what that source revealed and what the intelligence community thinks is important about it.

But in these previous cases in which information was withheld, the decision wasn't motivated by a concern about a president's trustworthiness or discretion, the current and former officials said.

It wasn't clear Wednesday how many times officials have held back information from Mr. Trump.

The officials emphasized that they know of no instance in which crucial information about security threats or potential plotting has been omitted. Still, the misgivings that have emerged among intelligence officials point to the fissures spreading between the White House and the U.S. spy agencies.

Mr. Trump, a Republican, asked Monday night for the resignation of Mike Flynn, his national security adviser, after the White House said the president lost trust in him, in part, because he misstated the nature of his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

On Wednesday, Mr. Trump castigated the intelligence agencies and the news media, blaming them for Mr. Flynn's downfall.

"The real scandal here is that classified information is illegally given out by 'intelligence' like candy. Very un-American!" Mr. Trump tweeted.

Mr. Trump doesn't immerse himself in intelligence information, and it isn't clear that he has expressed a desire to know sources and methods. The intelligence agencies have been told to dramatically pare down the president's daily intelligence briefing, both the number of topics and how much information is described under each topic, an official said. Compared with his immediate predecessors, Mr. Trump so far has chosen to rely

less on the daily briefing than they did.

The current and former officials said the decision to avoid revealing sources and methods with Mr. Trump stems in large part from the president's repeated expressions of admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his call during the presidential campaign for Russia to continue hacking the emails of his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia stole and leaked emails from Mrs. Clinton's campaign to undermine the election process and try to boost Mr. Trump's chances of winning, an allegation denied by Russian officials.

Several of Mr. Trump's current and former advisers are under investigation for the nature of their ties to Moscow, according to people familiar with the matter. After Mr. Flynn's dismissal, lawmakers have called on the government to release the transcripts of his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and to disclose whether Mr. Trump was aware of or directed Mr. Flynn's conversations.

Two senior intelligence officials denied Wednesday that Mr. Flynn had engaged in extensive contacts with Russian officials. One of the officials said none of the other advisers had extensive contacts with Russian officials or engaged in any pattern of contacts.

Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, said he has heard concerns from officials about sharing especially sensitive information with Mr. Trump.

"I've talked with people in the intelligence community that do have concerns about the White House, about the president, and I think those concerns take a number of forms," Mr. Schiff said, without confirming any specific incidents. "What the intelligence community considers their most sacred obligation is to protect the very best intelligence and to protect the people that are producing it."

"I'm sure there are people in the community who feel they don't know where he's coming from on Russia," Mr. Schiff said.

Tensions between the spy agencies and Mr. Trump were pronounced even before he took office, after he publicly accused the Central Intelligence Agency and others of leaking information about alleged Russian hacking operations to undermine the legitimacy of his election win. In a meandering speech in front of a revered CIA memorial the day after his inauguration, Mr. Trump boasted about the size of his inaugural crowd and accused the media of inventing a conflict between him and the agencies.

In a news conference on Wednesday with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, Mr. Trump again lashed out at the media and intelligence officials, whom he accused of "criminal"

leaks about Mr. Flynn's conversations with the Russian ambassador last December.

Mr. Trump didn't explain Wednesday why he asked for Mr. Flynn's resignation. Instead, he suggested the leaks and the media were to blame for his ouster.

"General Flynn is a wonderful man. I think he's been treated very, very unfairly by the media," Mr. Trump said. "And I think it's really a sad thing that he was treated so badly."

"I think in addition to that from intelligence, papers are being leaked, things are being leaked," Mr. Trump said. "It's criminal action. It's a criminal act and it's been going on for a long time before me but now it's really going on."

Reviving his line of criticism against intelligence officials during the transition, Mr. Trump said the "illegally leaked" information was from people with political

motivations. "People are trying to cover up for a terrible loss that the Democrats had under Hillary Clinton," Mr. Trump said.

A person close to Mr. Trump said he was reluctant to let go of Mr. Flynn because Mr. Flynn had vigorously supported him at a stage of his presidential campaign when few people did. Mr. Trump also felt Mr. Flynn did nothing wrong in his conversations with the U.S. ambassador to Russia and had good intentions.

"They both continue to support each other," this person said.

For intelligence veterans, who had hoped that Mr. Trump's feud with the agencies might have subsided, Wednesday's comments renewed and deepened concerns.

"This is not about who won the election. This is about concerns about institutional integrity," said

Mark Lowenthal, a former senior intelligence official.

"It's probably unprecedented to have this difficult a relationship between a president and the intelligence agencies," Mr. Lowenthal said. "I can't recall ever seeing this level of friction. And it's just not good for the country."

Several congressional probes are examining Russia's alleged meddling in the election. On Wednesday, the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate Judiciary Committee requested a Justice Department briefing and documents related to Mr. Flynn's resignation, including details of his communications with Russian officials.

—Damian Paletta contributed to this article.

The New York Times White House Plans to Have Trump Ally Review Intelligence Agencies (UNE)

James Risen and Matthew Rosenberg

On an array of issues — including the Iran nuclear deal, the utility of NATO, and how best to combat Islamist militancy — much of the information and analysis produced by American intelligence agencies contradicts the policy positions of the new administration. The divide is starkest when it comes to Russia and President Vladimir V. Putin, whom Mr. Trump has repeatedly praised while dismissing American intelligence assessments that Moscow sought to promote his own candidacy.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Trump has appointed Mike Pompeo, a former Republican congressman from Kansas, to run the C.I.A., and former Senator Dan Coats, an Indiana Republican, to be the director of national intelligence (he is still awaiting confirmation). Both were the preferred choices of the Republican congressional leadership and Vice President Mike Pence and had no close or longstanding ties to Mr. Trump. In fact, they each endorsed Senator Marco Rubio of Florida for president during the 2016 Republican primaries.

But the potential White House role for Mr. Feinberg follows intense speculation among intelligence professionals that Mr. Feinberg is in line for a powerful position within the intelligence community.

Reports that Mr. Feinberg was under consideration to run the

clandestine service rocked the intelligence community in recent weeks, raising the prospect of direct White House control over America's spies at a time when Mr. Trump's ties to Mr. Putin are under investigation by the F.B.I. and congressional committees.

The last time an outsider with no intelligence experience took the job was in the early days of the Reagan administration, when Max Hugel, a businessman who had worked on Mr. Reagan's campaign, was named to run the spy service. His tenure at the C.I.A. was marked by turmoil and questions about the politicization of the agency. He was forced to resign after six months, amid accusations about his past business dealings. (He later won a libel case against the two brothers who made the accusations.)

Even the prospect that Mr. Feinberg may lead a review for the White House has raised concerns in the intelligence community.

Mr. Coats is especially angry at what he sees as a move by Mr. Bannon and Mr. Kushner to sideline him before he is even confirmed, according to current and former officials. He believes the review would impinge on a central part of his role as the director of national intelligence and fears that if Mr. Feinberg were working at the White House, he could quickly become a dominant voice on intelligence matters.

Michael V. Hayden, a retired general who ran the C.I.A. and the

National Security Agency during President George W. Bush's administration, said it was hard to wrap his head around "the idea of a D.N.I. nominee in the confirmation process while others consider retooling the position."

"I think I'd be concerned, too," he said.

The challenge is less immediate for Mr. Pompeo. He does not see an urgent need for a review of the intelligence community, according to current and former American officials, but sees it as better than the appointment of Mr. Feinberg to a job with actual authority over daily intelligence operations.

Many intelligence officials question what purpose a White House intelligence review would serve other than to position Mr. Feinberg for a larger role in the future. Most significant changes to the intelligence community would require an act of Congress, a fact that would ultimately blunt whatever ideas or proposals Mr. Feinberg came up with. Even with a Republican majority in both houses, getting Congress to agree to major changes to intelligence agencies seems unlikely.

It is difficult to "object to someone putting fresh eyes on the organization of the intelligence community," Mr. Hayden said. "But, even though the D.N.I. staff has become far too large, I don't think any of us think a major restructuring of the community is in order."

Tensions between the intelligence community and the White House have already played out on several fronts. Before Mr. Flynn was forced out, one of his top aides, Robin Townley, was denied a security clearance by the C.I.A. But distrust of the intelligence community has been building for years in conservative political circles, where the C.I.A. during the Obama administration was seen as heavily politicized.

Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, said in a recent interview that some officials in the intelligence community were trustworthy but "not all."

Got a confidential news tip?

The New York Times would like to hear from readers who want to share messages and materials with our journalists.

"People there need to be rooted out," Mr. King said.

Another Republican lawmaker said that the predominant view at the White House is also that the politicians in the intelligence agencies need to be cleaned out.

Through Cerberus, his private equity company, Mr. Feinberg has strong ties to the government contracting industry. Cerberus owns DynCorp International, which has had a wide array of large contracts providing security to the State Department and other agencies. DynCorp is now locked in a major legal dispute over the fate of a \$10 billion State Department contract

that it previously held to provide air support for counternarcotics operations overseas.

John F. Kelly, the new Homeland Security secretary, was paid \$166,000 a year as a DynCorp

adviser until he was named to the new administration.

Cerberus also owns Remington Outdoor, a major firearms manufacturer.

In 2008, Mr. Feinberg also considered investing in Blackwater, the security firm founded by Erik Prince, a former member of the Navy SEALs, before it was ultimately acquired by other investors.

New York magazine reported last year that Mr. Feinberg went to Blackwater's North Carolina compound in 2005 to take firearms training.

The New York Times

After Election, Trump's Professed Love for Leaks Quickly Faded (UNE)

Michael D. Shear

But this is Washington, where leaks are common currency — and, depending what side you're on, either sinister or patriotic. Democrats these days see the proliferation of leaks about the Trump administration as the acts of public servants revealing the misdeeds of a presidency. Republicans see them as the reckless actions of disgruntled bureaucrats eager to advance their own agendas and sabotage Mr. Trump.

Either way, Mr. Trump's presidential flip-flop follows a landmark month for Washington leaks.

Drafts of his executive orders floated around the city for days before he signed them. Parts of the president's conversations with foreign leaders have been published verbatim in news accounts. Agency memos and cables have been repeatedly cited by journalists to document anxiety among the city's civil servants.

And an endless stream of articles about the connections between Trump advisers and Russia have been generated by leaks from intelligence and law enforcement sources. There are so many, in fact, that in one article about Mr. Flynn, The Washington Post cited an unusually large number of sources, beyond the customary two: "Nine current and former officials, who were in senior positions at multiple agencies at the time of the calls."

Laura R. Handman, a lawyer who represents news organizations on First Amendment issues, said of Mr. Trump, "He will not be the first president who has decried leaks once they become president."

"That does seem to be pretty much a constant in the

Oval Office," she said. "It's definitely true that he embraced them when the shoe was on the other foot."

Over the last several days, leaks about Mr. Flynn and the broader issue of communications with Russia have created the president's first major scandal, forcing Mr. Flynn to step down and leading to calls on Capitol Hill for investigations.

But Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, said that too little attention had been paid to how the information about Mr. Flynn was made public in the first place.

"It was through a leak of classified information through the Department of Justice and presumably the intel community," Mr. Spicer said. "Those are the only ones that have access to that information."

"The idea that there's been zero attention paid to an issue of that sensitivity should be concerning and alarming," he said.

Mr. Trump's Republican allies followed up on Mr. Spicer's lead by demanding to know who in the government has been leaking to the news media.

Representative Devin Nunes, Republican of California and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, told Fox News that his committee would be "asking the F.B.I. to do an assessment of this to tell us what's going on here, because we cannot continue to have these leaks as a government."

Other Republicans have been circumspect about whether they intend to support investigations into the Russian connections. Some, including Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader, support an inquiry by the intelligence committees. But Mr.

McConnell has rejected the need for a select committee to investigate the issue.

"We know how to do our work," Mr. McConnell said on MSNBC. "We have an Intelligence Committee."

In Mr. Trump's remarks at the White House, the president appeared to press for an inquiry on how information about Mr. Flynn's communications with the Russians became known publicly.

"It's been going on for a long time before me, but now it's really going on," Mr. Trump said of the leaks, accusing those who spread the information of "trying to cover up" for Mrs. Clinton's loss in the election last year. Mr. Trump added that there were "documents and papers that were illegally — I stress that, illegally leaked."

If Republicans succeed in guiding those committees to focus more on leaks — rather than on the underlying information they reveal — they will be following a well-worn path.

President Barack Obama, a Democrat, waged a furious war against leaks during his eight years in office, prosecuting more whistleblowers than all of his predecessors combined.

Joel Kurtzberg, a partner at Cahill, Gordon & Reindel who specializes in First Amendment cases, said Mr. Obama's actions had served to discourage public officials from disclosing information that revealed wrongdoing or was embarrassing to the administration.

"I would be concerned that, this early on, there is a public call to start a leak investigation, and really chill the divulgence of newsworthy information," Mr. Kurtzberg said. "It is a very important thing for the

press to be able to report on truthful information."

Journalists who work in Washington are often criticized for their use of anonymous sources and for publishing information that is sensitive or classified. That criticism often comes from those in power — which now includes Mr. Trump and his aides.

"It's been the case in Republican and Democratic administrations that presidents have not liked it," said Leonard Downie Jr., a former Washington Post executive editor who is now a journalism professor at Arizona State University.

Mr. Downie said he had been surprised by the volume of information leaked to reporters in just the first three weeks of Mr. Trump's presidency, apparently from people inside the government that Mr. Trump now leads.

"I would be concerned if this administration followed suit and began to try to punish people" who are responsible for leaking that information or publishing it, Mr. Downie said.

For his part, the president appeared eager to do just that.

In his Twitter messages, Mr. Trump railed against the "fake news media," which he accused of engaging in conspiracy theories and "blind hatred," apparently directed against him or his aides.

"Information is being illegally given to the failing @nytimes & @washingtonpost by the intelligence community (NSA and FBI?)," Mr. Trump wrote in one post. "Just like Russia."

him well in the past: Deploy weapons of mass distraction. "Look over there!" he yells, and we do. As a reality TV star, he knows our attention span is short, our desire for drama acute and our interest in shiny new objects extreme.

So he's shouting "Sabotage!" He's decrying leaks, and his allies are calling for an investigation of the



Begala : The irony of Trump whining about leaks

Paul Begala, a Democratic strategist and CNN political commentator, was a political consultant for Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992 and was counselor to Clinton in the White House. He was a consultant to Priorities USA Action, the pro-Hillary Clinton super PAC. The

opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

(CNN)In the face of mounting revelations of contacts between his campaign advisers and Russian intelligence, Donald Trump's best strategy is to come clean: release his tax returns, answer all questions, recuse Attorney General Jeff Sessions from any inquiries and

fully cooperate with an independent investigation. That is the only way to put to rest once and for all the notion that the President is compromised by our adversaries in Moscow.

Fat chance.

Skilled in the dark arts of deception, Trump instead is turning to a favorite tactic, one that has served

leakers. Not of the Russians. Not of the campaign advisers who U.S. investigators' allege spoke with Russians repeatedly throughout the campaign. Not of the supposed compromising information the Russians are reported to have on our new President. No, he's attacking the whistleblowers.

Keep in mind that when he paid \$25 million to people suing him for fraud over Trump University, he distracted the media by tweeting an attack on the cast of the Broadway musical "Hamilton." Mr. Trump apparently thought it was rude for cast members to lecture Mike Pence about diversity and inclusion. Because we all know Donald Trump is a stickler for good manners.

But it won't work this time. Because this time the story goes on, whether he likes it or not. Nothing short of full disclosure and an independent investigation will end the story of Russia's attempt to tilt the election to Trump.

Donald Trump whining about leaks

is like Jack the Ripper complaining about paper cuts. He is President in large part due to leaks. Had the Russians not hacked and robbed the emails of the Democratic National Committee and of Secretary Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, and then weaponized them through WikiLeaks, Trump would probably not be president. In a race determined by fewer than 80,000 votes, that's hard to dispute.

And in the final days of the campaign, FBI Director James Comey released a letter which essentially reopened an investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails once again -- based on....well, nothing. Turned out those Anthony Weiner emails had nothing to do with Hillary Clinton's case. But the damage was done.

It should be noted that Comey apparently knew about the Trump operatives' contacts with the Russians. But somehow that never leaked. The contrast between how Comey handled the Clinton case

and how he handled the Trump-Russia case boggles the mind.

Donald Trump has benefited from leaks more than the CEO of Depends. So forgive me if I am unpersuaded by Trump's complaints about them.

They will keep coming. Perhaps because the system of checks and balances seems to be broken. With Republican control of Congress, a full congressional investigation is unlikely. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) candidly told us why. "I just don't think it's useful to be doing investigation after investigation," Paul told the "Kilmeade & Friends" radio show. "Particularly of your own party. We'll never even get started with doing the things we need to do, like repealing Obamacare, if we're spending our whole time having Republicans investigate Republicans. I think it makes no sense."

Republicans don't investigate Republicans. Congressional Republicans will not fulfill their

oversight obligations; that might interfere with important things, like kicking 20 million Americans off health insurance.

So sensible whistleblowers probably won't go to the Hill. And they may not trust the Justice Department, either. After all, our new attorney general was an early and effective Trump supporter, and he has no appetite for recusing himself from investigating a campaign he played a crucial role in.

That leaves the free press. The Fourth Estate is the only option for whistleblowers. When the justice system seems compromised and congressional oversight is negligent, government officials with damning information are going to leak. And leak. And leak.

I suppose there is some poetic justice in seeing the man who was made President because of leaks potentially hobbled by them. If you live by the leak, you die by the leak.

The Washington Post

Flynn saga shifts balance of power between president, Congress (UNE)

By Sean Sullivan and Karoun Demirjian

Michael Flynn's resignation as national security adviser is shifting the balance of power between President Trump and Congress, with Republican senators vowing to more aggressively exercise oversight of the new administration and Democrats seizing an opportunity to ask pointed questions about Trump's ties to Russia.

On Wednesday, Senate Democrats convened an emergency meeting to plan their next steps in probing the circumstances that led to Flynn's departure. While significant disagreement remains among Democrats and between the parties on the path forward, Senate GOP leaders affirmed their commitment to conducting a far-reaching investigation through the Senate Intelligence Committee that is already examining allegations of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections.

"It is now readily apparent that General Flynn's resignation is not the end of the story. It is merely a beginning of a much longer story," Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said on the Senate floor.

Since Trump was elected, Capitol Hill Republicans have tread carefully when it comes to the new administration. They have deflected calls for probes into Trump's potential conflicts of interest related

to his sprawling business interests and only recently asked for information from the White House about security protocols at Trump's Florida resort, Mar-a-Lago. But after allegations that Russia intervened in the election to favor Trump, both the House and Senate intelligence committees launched examinations.

Amid reports of contacts between Trump aides and Russian officials during the election, congressional leaders are reasserting their authority.

President Trump on Feb. 15 faced renewed questions on whether his 2016 presidential campaign had contacts with Russian officials. Meanwhile, Trump's nominee for labor secretary, Andrew Puzder, withdrew a day before his confirmation hearing. President Trump on Feb. 15 faced renewed questions on whether his 2016 presidential campaign had contacts with Russian officials. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

(Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

"You know, everybody looks at last year's election and says it was a change election," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said on MSNBC's "Morning Joe." "Well, it was in the presidential race, but in the Senate races, it was not a change election."

McConnell reiterated that the Senate Intelligence Committee will

take the lead in investigating Flynn, rather than an independent panel.

"I don't think we need to go through setting up a special committee," said McConnell. "But we are going to look at Russian involvement in the U.S. election. It's a significant issue."

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) agreed that "Russia's the elephant in the room."

"That's what we need to be dealing with," Corker said.

[A turf war breaks out in the Senate: Who will investigate Russia's connections to the Trump campaign?]

House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) urged Democrats and Republicans to unite to oppose dropping sanctions on Russia at a news conference, Feb. 15. House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer, Rep. Eliot Engel and Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) urge Democrats and Republicans to oppose dropping sanctions on Russia (The Washington Post)

(The Washington Post)

Senate Democratic leaders largely agreed with that approach Wednesday, even as some rank-and-file lawmakers said they didn't trust Republicans to conduct an evenhanded examination of their

own party's White House. The majority party has broad powers to determine the course of an investigation in a Senate committee.

For Democrats, the growing controversy offered an opportunity to renew public scrutiny of Trump's relationship with Russia, an issue that has hovered over him since the campaign. But they faced their own political quandary as some voices — including party strategists outside Congress — called for the creation of an independent commission over which lawmakers, especially Republicans, would have less control

"I'm just not convinced that Mitch McConnell is going to let the Intelligence Committee get to the real story," said Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), who advocated the establishment of an independent commission.

However, Democrats conceded they did not have the support they needed for such a move — primarily, backing from McConnell — and decided to press for a full-throated investigation by Congress instead.

After meeting Wednesday, Schumer, Sen. Mark R. Warner (Va.) — the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee — and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (Calif.) — the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee — demanded a comprehensive and bipartisan investigation of Trump's ties to

Russia, demanding that lawmakers be "committed to making their findings as public as possible."

Schumer had previously endorsed the idea of an independent commission. But other Democrats feared risking what precious momentum they had built for an investigation by pushing for such a move.

"We've already started this process. We're already starting to review the raw intelligence. We're well down this path," Warner told reporters Wednesday. "I think that would greatly delay the process, and what I think everyone wants, regardless of where we stand, is we want to get this done expeditiously."

Warner insisted that he has faith in Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr's commitment to pursue the investigation fairly, adding that, "if at any point we're not able to get the full information and we're not pursuing the information to where the intelligence leads, that we'll look at other options."

Democrats also say they want the Justice Department — specifically, the FBI — to continue investigating the allegations that Russia intervened in the 2016 election in an attempt to help Trump win. But they are insisting that Attorney General Jeff Sessions — a former senator and close Trump campaign confidant — recuse himself.

Meanwhile, Republicans — especially in the Senate — vowed a

thorough investigation into Flynn's communications with Russia and other ties between the two countries. Flynn resigned Monday night following revelations that he spoke about sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the United States after the election but before Trump took office, a potential violation of the law. He also misled Trump administration officials, including Vice President Pence, about his communication.

[Pence remains above the fray, but is he outside the inner circle?]

Burr (R-N.C.) promised the investigation would be wide-ranging.

"I'm not sure the Intelligence Committee has tight parameters on it. We've said we're going to go anywhere the intelligence leads," Burr said. "Once we know more about what went on, we'll make a determination."

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) and the top Democrat on the panel, Feinstein, sent Sessions and FBI Director James B. Comey a letter Wednesday asking for copies of transcripts of Flynn's intercepted calls as well as a committee briefing later this month on the events leading up to Flynn's resignation.

In the House, Republican leaders have been less aggressive toward Trump, raising questions about how serious the GOP as a whole is about holding him accountable. Permanent Select Committee on

Intelligence Chairman Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) has said he is more concerned about leaks to the news media chronicling Flynn's contact with Kremlin officials, as well as a New York Times report that several Trump campaign officials talked repeatedly with Russian officials during the election.

"Frankly, it's safer for them to talk about leaks than be critical of the president," Adam B. Schiff (Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said of his GOP colleagues. "There's still a lot they want from this president in the form of tax cuts and regulatory giveaways, so I think they're hoping to get what they can get before they have to confront him."

"All of us know that leaks happen in this town, and we all don't like it — but the fact is that you now have a much larger issue to address," said Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.).

At least one Republican said lawmakers should establish a "joint select committee" — consisting of members of the House and the Senate.

"Now, was this outside the norm? Was this something damaging to the country?" Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said in a Fox News Channel interview Wednesday. "I don't know, but if there were contacts between Russian officials and Trump campaign operatives that [were] inappropriate, then it would be time for the Congress to form a joint

select commission to get to the bottom of all things Russia and Trump."

Democrats are insisting on some ground rules for the investigations, which could take place in multiple panels.

The Daily 202 newsletter

A must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

Please provide a valid email address.

They are demanding that the Trump administration preserve all its records from the transition period, citing "real concern" that officials might "try to cover up ties to Russia" by deleting emails, texts and other documents establishing links between the Trump White House and the Kremlin, Schumer said. Democrats also want Flynn, former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort and other campaign officials to make themselves available to testify.

Republicans have yet to sign off on such demands. But even senators in the president's own party recognize that Congress has a responsibility to act.

"The national security adviser lied to the vice president of the United States," McCain said. "That's a pretty serious event."

David Weigel contributed to this report.

The New York Times Andrew Puzder Withdraws From Consideration as Labor Secretary (UNE)

Alan Rappeport

A spokesman for Mr. Puzder, George Thompson, said his treatment had been "an unprecedented smear campaign."

In a statement, Mr. Puzder thanked the president and those who supported him for their optimism about the "policies and new thinking" he would have brought to the job.

Mr. Puzder's withdrawal came two days after the resignation of Mr. Trump's national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn. Earlier this month, his nominee for Army secretary, the billionaire financier Vincent Viola, also withdrew his name from consideration, saying he could not disentangle his business connections. And his secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, was confirmed only after Vice President Mike Pence cast a tiebreaking vote.

The Senate must still vote on the nomination of Representative Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina to be Mr. Trump's budget director, over the loud objection of Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, who took to the Senate floor again Wednesday to accuse Mr. Mulvaney, a hard-line conservative, of being anti-military.

"This is not personal. This is not political. This is about principle," Mr. McCain said. "This is about my conviction as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee that providing for the common defense is our highest constitutional duty."

Mr. Trump's nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, is facing a revolt by E.P.A. employees scrambling to block him. Ms. Collins declared her opposition to him Wednesday.

Republicans blamed Democratic obstruction, not the quality of the president's choices, for the arduous confirmation process.

"I think when you have to put all this energy into an unreasonable nominations process, it takes away the energy that could better be used for other things," Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri said.

Democrats cheered Mr. Puzder's withdrawal as a victory for working Americans. The Labor Department regulates workplace safety, enforces wage and hour laws, maintains unemployment and payroll data, and is generally seen as an advocate for workers. Mr. Puzder, at the helm of his fast-food company, ardently opposed the Affordable Care Act, cast a skeptical eye on minimum wage and overtime rules, and pledged an assault on regulations that he said in his withdrawal statement would "put America's workers and

businesses back on a path to sustainable prosperity."

Some critics also cast him as sexist, denouncing fast-food advertisements he championed that featured bikini-clad women eating monstrous hamburgers.

"The simple truth is that, given his relationship to employees at the companies he runs, he was not fit to lead a department responsible for defending workers' rights," said Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination last year.

Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader, called on Mr. Trump to nominate someone who supported the rights of workers rather than suppressed them.

"Puzder should never have even been nominated to lead the Labor Department, and Senate Republicans clearly recognized this,

too," Mr. Schumer said. "The fact that someone so anti-labor was even nominated shows how far President Trump is from where he campaigned."

As the chief executive of CKE Restaurants, which owns the Hardee's and Carl's Jr. fast-food chains, Mr. Puzder had come under intense criticism from Democrats and liberal groups that accused him of mistreating his workers and supporting automation in the workplace. The intense scrutiny of his personal life compounded his troubles.

His hearing was repeatedly delayed as he sought to extricate himself from his business and investments. Democrats, who organized screenings of the video of his wife detailing her allegations of abuse, were preparing to make his marriage an issue and to question him about his company's salacious TV ads. However, as recently as last week, he had said through a

spokesman that he was "all in" to move forward.

Despite the growing backlash, the White House and Republican leaders tried to rally support around him last week, arguing that no nominee was perfect.

"I think Andy Puzder is an outstanding choice," said Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, who counted himself a friend of Mr. Puzder's. "We're always looking for nominees who have never made a mistake. Frequently, it's impossible to find nominees who have never made a mistake."

Republicans quietly acknowledged the setback as they saluted Mr. Puzder.

"Andy Puzder has the experience and ability to make an excellent labor secretary, but I respect his decision," said Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, the chairman of the labor committee.

Mr. Trump ignored questions about Mr. Puzder after a meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel on Wednesday afternoon, but he will be under pressure to quickly find a replacement.

While labor groups and supporters of a higher minimum wage opposed Mr. Puzder, some in corporate America had been optimistic that he would understand the plight of businesses and relieve companies of regulations.

The National Restaurant Association, the industry's lobbying group and one of Mr. Puzder's biggest backers, lamented his treatment on Wednesday and expressed hope that Mr. Trump would choose someone else in his mold.

"It is extremely unfortunate that the confirmation process has resulted in a qualified and dedicated man withdrawing from the labor secretary nomination," said Cicely

Simpson, executive vice president of the association. "We hope that President Trump's next labor secretary nominee, like Andy, has experience creating jobs and a deep understanding how to get business and government to work together to grow the economy."

Jim Talent, a former Missouri senator, had been helping prepare Mr. Puzder for his confirmation hearing and said he was ready to answer the questions about his family and his business record. After it became clear to Mr. Puzder that he did not have sufficient Republican support, Mr. Talent said, he decided to drop out.

"Nobody likes a process where you're attacked all the time," Mr. Talent said. "He was looking forward to being able to address these concerns, particularly the ones about his family."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Editorial : Another Trump Casualty

Andy Puzder withdrew his nomination for Labor Secretary Wednesday after a ferocious union and media assault, and is President Trump paying attention? This is what happens, sir, when a White House starts losing, losing, losing.

Mr. Puzder, the CEO of CKE Restaurants, was a rare business executive willing publicly to support Mr. Trump during the campaign. As an expert in labor management, he was ideal to reform a Labor Department that was run for eight years as a wholly owned subsidiary of the AFL-CIO. He would also have been a much-needed advocate for free markets in Mr. Trump's senior economic councils.

Mr. Puzder's reward was to get

caught in a cross-fire between the union left and the anti-immigration right. Unions rolled out a misinformation campaign broadcasting worker grievances at his Carl's Jr. and Hardee's restaurants, though the number and nature were politically concocted and his corporate stores are business models.

Mr. Puzder was also targeted by some on the right because he supported more legal immigration to meet the needs of a growing U.S. economy, which is a mortal sin on the restrictionist right. Mr. Puzder had once employed a housekeeper he didn't know was undocumented, and though he fired her and paid back taxes, restrictionists wanted to punish him for supporting immigration reform. Heaven forfend

he'd help farmers address their severe labor shortage. Did White House aides Stephen Bannon or Stephen Miller give the word to Breitbart and other Trumpian news outlets that they could unload on Mr. Puzder?

Certainly the White House did little to defend the businessman. His small nomination team had to rebut the false charges more or less on their own. While outside groups spent millions of dollars to bolster nominees Scott Pruitt, Jeff Sessions and Betsy DeVos, almost nothing was spent to help Mr. Puzder.

The White House should be especially concerned that Republican Senators dumped Mr. Puzder so easily. As many as a dozen were worried about the left-

right assaults and asked the White House to spare them from a vote to confirm by withdrawing the nomination. So much for Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's promise that all Trump nominees would make it. This is what happens when Republicans begin to feel they must distance themselves from an unpopular President.

The White House will compound its mistakes if it responds by trying to appease the union left or restrictionist right with its next nominee. Mr. Trump needs a Labor secretary who can help workers prosper in a competitive world, not treat labor economics as a zero-sum game of political redistribution.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Andy Puzder, Donald Trump's Labor Pick, Withdraws (UNE)

Updated Feb. 15, 2017 7:20 p.m. ET

Andy Puzder withdrew himself from consideration to become Labor secretary in a new personnel blow to the White House, after Republican support in the Senate disintegrated over personal issues that dogged the fast-food executive leading up to a planned confirmation hearing.

His swift withdrawal came just a day after Mike Flynn, President Donald Trump's national security adviser, resigned over conflicting statements

Eric Morath and Kristina Peterson

he made about contacts with Russian officials last year.

Edward Hugler, a career bureaucrat employed by the department since 1978, will likely remain acting secretary until a new nominee can be confirmed. That could put on hold any major policy shifts. Mr. Trump has already delayed implementation of a rule governing certain financial advisers until April 10, and asked the department to revise or rescind the regulation known as the fiduciary rule.

Mr. Puzder is Mr. Trump's first cabinet-level nominee to drop out. Other presidents have lost nominees in the past, including

former Sen. Tom Daschle in 2009, Bernard Kerik in 2004 and Zoe Baird in 1993.

- Intelligence Officials Keep Information From Trump

U.S. intelligence officials have withheld sensitive intelligence from President Donald Trump because they are concerned it could be leaked or compromised.

Click to Read Story

- Trump Drops Push for Two-State Solution in Mideast

President Donald Trump abandoned Washington's decades-

old push for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, saying the two sides should determine for themselves whether separate states were necessary for peace.

Click to Read Story

- Advertisement
- Pence Finds Himself in Unusual Role in Flynn's Firing

Mike Pence showed his clout with the firing of Mike Flynn, but the vice president also was kept in the dark about Mr. Flynn's deceptions for two

weeks in the White House's loose-knit power structure.

[Click to Read Story](#)

- Mike Flynn Is First Casualty of Turmoil in Trump Administration

President Donald Trump's nascent administration is being weighed down from within, sidetracked by dishonesty and potential ethical lapses inside the White House and questions about the strength of his leadership from fellow Republicans.

[Click to Read Story](#)

- One of Government's Largest Landlords Pays Millions Each Year to Trump Company

President Trump's company receives tens of millions of dollars a year from Vornado Realty Trust, which is vying for new work from the Trump administration.

[Click to Read Story](#)

- Advertisement
- Senate Majority Leader Takes on High-Wire Balancing Act

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, trying to manage an ambitious legislative agenda amid White House turmoil, aims to focus on shared goals with President Trump.

[Click to Read Story](#)

TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

Mr. Puzder's withdrawal came as the new president is still trying to fill out his leadership team. A half-dozen secretary posts remain vacant nearly a month after Mr. Trump took office.

The White House blames opposition from Democrats, though the new administration has also been plagued by its own vetting glitches and has struggled to win support from people in its own party. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos was approved only with the help of a tiebreaking vote from Vice President Mike Pence after two Republicans defected.

Mr. Trump's nominee for secretary of the army, Vincent Viola, this month withdrew his name from consideration over concerns about whether he could separate his business interests to meet Defense Department ethics standards.

"While I won't be serving in the administration, I fully support the president and his highly qualified team." Mr. Puzder said in a statement Wednesday.

A pair of personal controversies fueled concerns about Mr. Puzder. A decades-old spousal abuse allegation, which his ex-wife has recanted, resurfaced in recent days with a video of her appearing in disguise on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 1990.

In addition, Mr. Puzder disclosed last week that he failed to pay taxes for an undocumented housekeeper.

The pushback on Mr. Puzder showed the GOP is willing to defy the president on his preferred nominee, a businessman who was an early supporter of Mr. Trump's campaign. Mr. Puzder could afford no more than two GOP defections in the Senate, where Republicans hold a slim 52-48 majority.

Concern among GOP senators over Mr. Puzder had been building for weeks. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) and Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.), the chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, both continued to back Mr. Puzder in public and in private, but potential defections among the rank-and-file were growing.

By Wednesday at least a half-dozen Republicans had told GOP leaders they weren't sure they would be able to support him, according to Senate GOP aides. Senior Senate Republican leaders informed the White House Mr. Puzder didn't have the votes.

Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine) said Wednesday she had made her reservations clear, and fellow GOP Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Johnny Isakson of Georgia, Tim Scott of South Carolina and John Thune of South Dakota, a member of Senate GOP leadership, were undecided heading into the hearing, which had been scheduled for Thursday.

Ms. Collins and Ms. Murkowski opposed Ms. DeVos, making her confirmation a nail biter.

"I've expressed my concerns about a number of issues" regarding Mr. Puzder, Ms. Collins said Wednesday as she left a closed-door lunch of Senate Republicans.

Some Republicans who had already backed Mr. Puzder, including Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), had said the discovery that he had delayed paying taxes on his undocumented housekeeper raised new questions for them.

Democrats were also united in opposition to the chief executive of CKE Restaurants Holdings Inc., which owns the Carl's Jr. and Hardee's burger brands. Some said the company under his leadership mistreated low-wage workers. He

was an opponent of a large minimum-wage increase, an issue important to Democrats and their union allies.

"Puzder should never have even been nominated to lead the Labor Department and Senate Republicans clearly recognized this too," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) said. "The fact that someone so antilabor was even nominated shows how far President Trump is from where he campaigned."

White House press secretary Sean Spicer criticized Senate Democrats for having "slow-walked" many of the president's nominees, accusing them of engaging in a double standard that had left the president without important positions filled around him.

Mr. Spicer declined to discuss a potential successor Wednesday.

The Labor Department will likely wait for a successor is confirmed to consider rewriting an Obama-era regulation that sought to expand overtime eligibility to millions more workers. A federal court last year halted that rule from taking effect, providing an opening for the Trump administration to revisit it. And without a secretary, the administration may be slow filling other labor-related posts, including the head of the Wage and Hour division, commissioner of Bureau of Labor Statistics and two positions on the National Labor Relations Board. The board remains majority Democrats due to the vacancies.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker has been mentioned as a Republican who could step into the role. Shortly after Mr. Puzder withdrew, Mr. Walker tweeted that the future is "too bright" in Wisconsin "for me to do anything other than being Governor."

Another possible candidate could be Victoria Lipnic, a former assistant secretary of labor under President George W. Bush. Mr. Trump elevated Ms. Lipnic last month to serve as acting chairwoman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She didn't respond to a call for comment Wednesday night.

Mr. Puzder removed himself from consideration Wednesday, hours after the New York Daily News posted a video purported to be Mr. Puzder's former wife, Lisa Fierstein, appearing on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." The woman in the video discussed abuse at the hands of her husband, whom she didn't name.

Ms. Fierstein wrote a letter to lawmakers last month in which she recanted claims of abuse made

during the couple's divorce proceeding in the late 1980s. In the letter, she called Mr. Puzder "a good, loving, kind man." She confirmed she appeared on the show, writing that she was persuaded by her friends' encouragement and a free trip to Chicago. Mr. Puzder denied the abuse allegations.

Several senators said they needed to learn more from Mr. Puzder about his failure to pay taxes on the illegal-immigrant housekeeper. Mr. Puzder's spokesman has said that the nominee wasn't aware of the housekeeper's immigration status during the four to five years she worked part time for his family.

The employment of an undocumented worker has brought into focus how Mr. Puzder differs from the president and some Republican lawmakers on some immigration policies.

In a July opinion piece in The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Puzder and Stephen Moore, an economist who is a fellow Trump supporter and a former opinion writer for The Wall Street Journal, wrote how their views on immigration differed from Mr. Trump's. "Deportation should be pursued only when an illegal immigrant has committed a felony or become a public charge," they wrote.

On Wednesday morning the conservative National Review published an editorial calling for Senators to reject Mr. Puzder because he supported the "Gang of Eight" immigration reform plan, "precisely the approach to immigration policy that Donald Trump opposed during his campaign."

One senator who met with the president last week and several other people said the president is open to the sort of comprehensive overhaul that reform plan laid out. The White House disputed this characterization.

Mr. Puzder had received strong support for his bid from restaurant owners, small businesses and franchised-business trade groups, who viewed him as a job creator who would roll back Obama-era rules expanding overtime pay, raising the minimum wage for federal contractors and scrap an enforcement strategy that specifically targeted quick-service restaurants.

"Andy will continue his dedicated pursuit towards advancing growth for all workers as the leader of one of America's great franchises and everything this business model represents," said International



Andrew Puzder withdraws labor nomination, throwing White House into more turmoil (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/E-d-OKeeffe/147995121918931>

Andrew Puzder, President Trump's labor secretary nominee, withdrew from consideration Wednesday amid growing resistance from Senate Republicans centered primarily on Puzder's past employment of an undocumented housekeeper.

The collapse of Puzder's nomination threw the White House into further turmoil just two days after the resignation of Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, amid revelations that Flynn had spoken repeatedly, and possibly illegally, with the Russian ambassador last year about lifting U.S. sanctions.

Puzder's fate amplified the deteriorating relationship between the White House and Capitol Hill, where bipartisan support grew Wednesday for expanded investigations into ties between Trump, his presidential campaign and Russian officials.

The White House, including Trump, offered no comment on Puzder's withdrawal nor any indication of whom the president would nominate in the restaurant executive's place. Puzder issued a statement saying he was "honored" to have been nominated. "While I won't be serving in the administration, I fully support the President and his highly qualified team," he said.

A top Trump campaign supporter, Puzder had attracted widespread criticism regarding his business record and personal background. He was set to testify Thursday at a confirmation hearing that had been delayed for weeks to allow for the completion of an ethics review of his vast personal wealth.

Critics have railed against Puzder's positions against minimum-wage increases and more generous overtime benefits. Some have also accused him of sexism, pointed to a rancorous divorce that involved later-recanted allegations of domestic abuse as well as racy TV ads run by his restaurant chains that featured scantily clad women eating hamburgers.

But it was Puzder's hiring of an undocumented worker for domestic work — as well as his support for more liberalized immigration policies — that pushed several

Senate Republicans away, they said.

Puzder had told the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions this month that he had been unaware of the housekeeper's immigration status when he hired her and that he paid federal and state back taxes after terminating her employment.

Similar revelations have forced Cabinet nominees to withdraw dating to at least Bill Clinton's presidency, but it was less clear this year, in the unpredictable, rule-breaking era of Trump, whether that norm would apply. In the end, the revelation was particularly troubling to lawmakers because of the job Puzder was seeking: running the Labor Department.

Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.), a member of the Senate health committee, said Wednesday that revelations about Puzder's personal employment practices gave him "serious concerns" that he had conveyed to Senate leaders. Three other GOP senators on the committee, Susan Collins (Maine), Johnny Isakson (Ga.) and Lisa Murkowski (Alaska), had also publicly voiced doubts.

In the hours before Puzder withdrew, 12 Republican senators "at a minimum" were withholding support, according to a senior Republican who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid political retribution. The quick erosion of support compelled Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) to tell the White House on Wednesday that Puzder lacked the support needed to survive, according to two senior Senate aides who requested anonymity. Shortly after that, Puzder withdrew.

Senators may yet face another contentious confirmation vote Thursday, when Rep. Mick Mulvaney (R-S.C.), Trump's nominee to lead the Office of Management and Budget, is scheduled for a final vote on the Senate floor. On Wednesday, Mulvaney lost the backing of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who objects to Mulvaney's support for military spending cuts.

How long Cabinet confirmations take — and why past nominees failed

[Trump's pick for budget director just lost a crucial backer in the Senate]

Puzder has spent much of his career in the restaurant industry speaking out against wage and labor regulations. The former commercial trial lawyer has been a staunch opponent of rules finalized by the Labor Department last year — and since put on hold — that would have expanded the number of people eligible for overtime pay. He also has been critical of substantially increasing the minimum wage, arguing that it could push companies to cut jobs and encourage businesses to invest more money in automation.

As a result, Puzder's nomination immediately came under intense scrutiny from unions, labor groups and consumer advocates who worried the executive would prioritize businesses over workers. As recently as this week, workers from his fast-food chain and advocates for a higher minimum wage marched outside of CKE's restaurants to protest the nomination. Worker advocates had also hand-delivered petitions to senators' local offices and organized trips for CKE employees to travel to Capitol Hill and share their grievances with senators.

[Watchdog group working to unseal Puzder's divorce records before his confirmation hearing]

Democrats cheered Puzder's withdrawal and sought to take credit for helping pressure Republicans to withdraw support.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) called Puzder's decision "a victory for the American worker. Puzder should never have even been nominated to lead the Labor Department, and Senate Republicans clearly recognized this, too." He called on Trump to nominate someone who "champions workers' rights rather than suppresses them."

Progressives and Democrats said they hoped Trump's next pick for labor secretary would be someone with a clear willingness to speak up for disadvantaged workers.

"We need a labor secretary in the mainstream who supports the workplace protections that he or she would be charged with enforcing — and who cares about workers," said Emily Martin, general counsel for the National Women's Law Center, which opposed Puzder's nomination because of "sexist" advertising run by Carl's Jr. and Hardee's — two of Puzder's restaurant chains — and

reports of harassment from employees working for the chain.

Several names that had emerged on Trump's shortlist for labor secretary late last year began recirculating Wednesday. Among them: Rep. Lou Barletta (R-Pa.) and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. After Puzder's withdrawal Wednesday, Walker tweeted: "The future is too bright in WI for me to do anything other than being Governor."

Puzder would have been the first labor secretary since the Reagan era to take the job without some experience in public service. He made a minor foray into politics in 2011, when he served as an economic adviser and spokesman for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who recently endorsed his nomination.

In 2016, Puzder was an avid Trump supporter. In addition to serving as an economic adviser to his campaign, he and his wife, Deanna Puzder, contributed a total of \$332,000 to Trump's bid, joint fundraising committees and to the Republican National Committee, according to the Federal Election Commission.

Senators often do not weigh in on a nominee publicly until after a confirmation hearing, but Republicans have been mostly in lockstep to support Trump's top Cabinet nominees. Only one other pick — Secretary of State Rex Tillerson — drew as much public wavering among Republicans before his hearing, when five GOP senators expressed doubts. Ultimately, all of them voted for Tillerson.

Beyond the committee where Puzder was scheduled to appear Thursday, three other Republicans — John Thune (S.D.), Rob Portman (Ohio) and Thom Tillis (N.C.) — publicly expressed concerns about his nomination.

Thune's hesitancy was notable because he is the third-ranking Senate Republican and responsible for helping to build support for big-ticket GOP causes. He told reporters Wednesday that he wanted to know more about why Puzder employed an undocumented housekeeper and how he paid her. Tillis cited the same concerns to reporters.

Collins and Murkowski also voted against Betsy DeVos, Trump's choice for education secretary,

forcing Vice President Pence to become the first vice president to cast a tiebreaking confirmation vote for a Cabinet member. Both senators are among several who had seen footage of a 1990 "Oprah Winfrey Show" episode in which Puzder's former wife appeared in disguise to describe allegations of domestic violence.

The health committee requested that Winfrey's production company provide copies of the episode for senators to review. Puzder has always denied the allegations, and his ex-wife recanted the accusations in 1990 when the couple reached a child-custody agreement at the time of their divorce and again in a letter to senators last month.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

2017 5:28 p.m. ET

Robust consumer spending, an uptick in factory production and firming inflation are pointing to a healthy start in 2017 for the U.S. economy and another interest-rate increase by the Federal Reserve, potentially as soon as next month.

The Commerce Department on Wednesday reported stronger-than-expected growth in retail sales in January, and the Fed reported factory output increased last month. The Labor Department said a closely watched gauge of U.S. inflation rose to its highest annual level in nearly five years, the latest sign that years of sluggish price growth could be coming to an end.

Together with Fed Chairwoman Janet Yellen's statement this week that the central bank may raise rates "at our upcoming meetings," the inflation uptick boosted the odds of a rate increase in mid-March. Fed-funds futures tracked by CME Group on Wednesday signaled a roughly 1-in-4 chance of a Fed move at next month's policy meeting, double the probability before Ms. Yellen's congressional testimony on Tuesday.

Both stocks and government-bond yields moved higher Wednesday on greater confidence in U.S. growth. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 107.45 points, or 0.5%, to a record close of 20611.86. The yield on the 10-year Treasury note registered its fifth consecutive daily increase, climbing to 2.502%, a three-week high, from 2.470% Tuesday.

Ms. Yellen told lawmakers it "would be unwise" to wait too long to raise rates, because it could force the Fed to tighten policy more quickly

Aides said before Puzder's withdrawal that Portman was still reviewing his history and did not want to weigh in yet, but the senator represents a state where labor unions were building support against the nomination. Portman won reelection last year with the endorsement of several labor unions, a rare feat these days for a Republican.

[Oprah Winfrey's TV network provided footage of interview tied to Andrew Puzder's labor secretary nomination]

Another blow to Puzder's chances came on Wednesday morning when the conservative National Review announced its opposition. The publication cited Puzder's past

support for increased levels of legal immigration for high-skilled or seasonal workers — a position at odds with Trump's calls for limited legal immigration.

The Daily 202 newsletter

A must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

Please provide a valid email address.

The magazine's editors acknowledged "the impulse of the White House and the Senate to try to bulldog through rather than to give obstructionist Democrats a scalp." But, they wrote, "The country, and the administration, can weather a redo on this one."

The National Restaurant Association — which had marshaled members across the country to help Puzder — called his withdrawal "extremely unfortunate."

"Andy Puzder would have made a great labor secretary," said Cicely Simpson, the group's executive vice president. "We hope that President Trump's next labor secretary nominee, like Andy, has experience creating jobs and a deep understanding how to get business and government to work together to grow the economy."

Paul Kane and Ashley Parker contributed to this report.

Latest Data Signal Solid Momentum for U.S. Economy (UNE)

Ben Leubsdorf

Updated Feb. 15,

down the road and potentially cause a new recession in the process.

The stock market jumped following the Nov. 8 presidential election, along with surveys of consumer confidence and business sentiment, raising hopes for a pickup in overall economic growth. Still, it is too soon to declare a clear breakout for the modest U.S. economic expansion now in its eighth year. Economists said the latest reports suggested economic output is growing at about the 2% annual rate that has prevailed for years.

"What really matters are the fundamentals: jobs, income, that sort of thing," said Gus Faucher, deputy chief economist at PNC Financial Services Group. Rising sentiment in anticipation of tax cuts and other policy shifts "may provide a little bit of a boost," he said, but "it needs to be pretty apparent that we're going to get these policies to have a really sustained impact on growth."

Forecasting firm Macroeconomic Advisers on Wednesday projected first-quarter gross-domestic-product growth at a 2.0% pace, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's GDPNow model estimated GDP growth at 2.2% in the first quarter. In the fourth quarter, GDP grew at a 1.9% annual rate, near its average since the recession ended in mid-2009.

Many economists believe it could be difficult for U.S. growth to exceed that pace in a sustained fashion due to demographic trends, including an aging population that is putting downward pressure on the labor-force participation rate, and long-subdued gains in worker productivity. Mr. Trump has said he hopes to achieve 4% annual growth by overhauling the tax code, boosting infrastructure spending,

rolling back federal regulations and negotiating new trade deals.

Ace Hardware Corp. Chief Executive John Venhuizen said he anticipated "solid and steady" momentum in consumer spending, despite weak sales at his chain last month that he attributed to warm weather curbing demand for salt, shovels and other winter gear across the Midwest and Northeast.

He said he hopes for a pickup in U.S. economic growth, but he is not expecting one just because there is chatter about tax cuts and regulatory reform under the Trump administration. "Talk is cheap," Mr. Venhuizen said.

The Commerce Department on Wednesday reported that sales at U.S. retail stores and restaurants increased 0.4% in January from the prior month, with spending steady or up in most categories outside a pullback in automotive purchases. Excluding both autos and gasoline, retail sales were up 0.7% last month, which was the strongest reading since last April.

Total retail sales in January rose 5.6% from a year earlier. The data were adjusted for seasonal variations but not inflation, so some of the increase in sales reflected rising prices.

The consumer-price index, a broad measure of what Americans pay for everything from seafood to shelter, increased a seasonally adjusted 0.6% in January from a month earlier, the Labor Department said Wednesday. That was the biggest gain since February 2013, boosted by rising prices for gasoline.

From a year earlier, overall prices rose 2.5% in January, the largest 12-month increase since March 2012. Prices were up 2.3% on the

year when excluding food and energy.

Inflation has been subdued for years amid lackluster economic growth and a stretch of low energy prices. That era may be coming to an end as unemployment falls, demand picks up and oil prices stabilize.

The Fed targets 2% annual inflation but favors the Commerce Department's personal-consumption-expenditures price index, which rose 1.6% in December from a year earlier.

Meanwhile, the Fed on Wednesday reported that industrial production—a measure of output at American factories, mines and utilities—declined 0.3% in January from a month earlier. Unseasonably warm temperatures cooled demand for utilities, but underlying figures showed modest progress for the manufacturing sector.

Factory output, the biggest component of industrial production, rose 0.2% in January. Output for motor vehicles and parts fell but production increased for most other categories including machinery, textiles and petroleum and coal products.

The mining index, which includes oil and natural-gas extraction, was up 0.4% from a year earlier last month. The annual increase is significant because the sector had dragged on economic growth in recent years.

"The turnaround in mining is real," Mr. Faucher said. "That's due to higher prices for commodities, and that is spilling over into manufacturing."

—Jeffrey Sparshott and Eric Morath contributed to this article.

Dionne : Trump is unfit to serve

Let's not mumble or whisper about the central issue facing our country: What is this democratic nation to do when the man serving as president of the United States plainly has no business being president of the United States?

The Michael Flynn fiasco was the entirely predictable product of the indiscipline, deceit, incompetence and moral indifference that characterize Donald Trump's approach to leadership.

Even worse, Trump's loyalties are now in doubt. Questions about his relationship with Vladimir Putin and Russia will not go away, even if congressional Republicans try to slow-walk a transparent investigation into what ties Trump has with Putin's Russia — and who on his campaign did what, and when, with Russian intelligence officials and diplomats.

The Daily 202 newsletter

A must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

Please provide a valid email address.

Party leaders should listen to those Republicans who are already pondering how history will judge their actions in this wrenching moment. Senators such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham seem to know it is only a matter of time before the GOP will have to confront Trump's unfitness. They also sense that Flynn's resignation

as national security adviser for lying about the nature of his contacts with Russia's ambassador to the United States raises fundamental concerns about Trump himself.

The immediate political controversy is over how Congress should investigate this. Republican leaders say attention from Congress's intelligence committees is sufficient, and for now Democrats have agreed to this path. But many in their ranks, along with some Republicans, argue it would be better to form a bipartisan select committee that could cross jurisdictional lines and be far more open about its work.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) told members of the media that the Senate Intelligence Committee will likely include former national security adviser Michael Flynn's contact with Russian officials as part of a probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election, on Feb. 14 at the Capitol. Senate Republicans: Intelligence Committee will investigate Flynn contact with Russia (The Washington Post)

(The Washington Post)

Those pushing for the select committee have reason to fear that keeping things under wraps in the intelligence panels could be a way to bury the story for a while and buy Trump time. Letting Americans in on what went on here, and quickly, is the only way to bolster trust in this administration, if that is even possible. And let's face the reality here: It could also hasten the end of

a presidency that could do immense damage to the United States.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions, in the meantime, must immediately recuse himself from all decisions about all aspects of the Russia investigation by the FBI and the intelligence services. Sessions should step back not simply because he is an appointee of the president but, more importantly, because he was a central figure in the Trump campaign. He cannot possibly be a neutral arbiter, and his involvement would only heighten fears of a coverup.

In this dark moment, we can celebrate the vitality of the institutions of a free society that are pushing back against a president offering the country a remarkable combination of authoritarian inclinations and ineptitude. The courts, civil servants, citizens — collectively and individually — and, yes, an unfettered media have all checked Trump and forced inconvenient facts into the sunlight.

It is a sign of how beleaguered Trump is that his Twitter response on Wednesday morning was not to take responsibility but to assign blame. His villains are leakers and the press: "Information is being illegally given to the failing @nytimes & @washingtonpost by the intelligence community (NSA and FBI?). Just like Russia."

It is notable that in acknowledging that the news reports are based on "information," Trump effectively confirmed them. At the same time, he was characteristically wrong

about Russia, whose government prevents transparency and punishes those who try to foster it. There's also this: Kremlin agents stole information from a political party in a free country. That is very different from the actions of the media's informants inside our government who are holding our own officials accountable for their false denials and fictitious claims.

It will be said that Trump was elected and thus deserves some benefit of the doubt. Isn't it rash to declare him unfit after so little time?

The answer is no, because the Trump we are seeing now is fully consistent with the vindictive, self-involved and scattered man we saw during the 17 months of his campaign. In one of the primary debates, Jeb Bush said of Trump: "He's a chaos candidate and he'd be a chaos president." Rarely has a politician been so prophetic.

And this is why nearly 11 million more Americans voted against Trump than for him. His obligation was to earn the trust of the 60 percent of Americans who told exit pollsters on Election Day that they viewed him unfavorably. Instead, he has ratified their fears, and then some.

As a country, we now need to face the truth, however awkward and difficult it might be.

Henninger : Is This Trump's Watergate?

Daniel Henninger

A president's blood is in the water and another White House staff can only look out the windows as the sharks arrive from miles off.

Dan Rather, who normally toils at explaining away his George W. Bush National Guard story for CBS years ago, swam toward the Trump White House Tuesday to posit that "Watergate is the biggest political scandal of my lifetime, until maybe now."

Like-minded trolls in the social-media village sent Mr. Rather's Facebook post viral. The Watergate "meme" that attached itself instantly to Mike Flynn's firing over his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak was: What did President Trump know, and when did he know it?

We are far from Watergate levels of threat to the Trump presidency. The Democrats are in the congressional minority, and however much they intone the I-word, there will be no Sam Ervin committee.

Impeachment, though, is not the goal of Donald Trump's opponents. They want to cut off his power—his hold on much of the American public. To do that, they need to make him look like a loser.

On Monday, the president lost Mike Flynn. On Wednesday, he lost Andy Puzder, his labor nominee. Both fell in large part because of an understaffed and dangerously diffused White House management structure. The Trump opposition—Democrats, unions, Never Trumpers—now know that if they can turn three Republican senators against him, he won't matter.

They may succeed unless Team Trump can reverse the tides starting to erode the foundations of the president's political support.

Let's talk about the swamp.

If we have learned anything about the Trump presidency, it is that Mr. Trump and his chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, despise the Washington swamp, which includes the city's lobbyists, all of its bureaucrats, every member of the media, the entire congressional delegation and their staffs.

At the moment, that would cover most of the forces arrayed against them, and a good question is whether they'll drain the swamp before the swamp swallows them.

Messrs. Trump and Bannon should give an older member of the Washington establishment a temporary Oval Office visa to talk

about what it was like during Watergate. Mr. Trump surely recalls the giddy frenzy of waking each day during Watergate to see what new anti-Nixon bombshell was on the morning newspaper's front page.

What happened to Richard Nixon an eon ago looks familiar: Donald Trump's presidency is getting bitten to death by an invisible, lethal ant hill of anonymous leakers.

Mr. Trump himself outputted this reality in remarks to the press Wednesday: "From intelligence, papers are being leaked, things are being leaked, it's criminal action, criminal act, and it's been going on for a long time." It sure has. Ask George Washington.

Back in the days of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the primary unidentified source was known as Deep Throat. Now, when the bar for anonymity is about an inch high, the

locutions of invisibility are more elegant. A favorite: "requested anonymity to speak candidly."

As always, it works. You could have spent all Wednesday reading grimly exhilarating stories based on almost no names, such as the Washington Post piece about the White House triumvirate of Mr. Trump, Mr. Bannon and Reince Priebus keeping Mike Pence out of the loop after they'd been told Jan. 26 by the Justice Department of Mr. Flynn's conversations with the Russian ambassador. Mr. Pence had gone on Sunday morning television earlier to defend Mr. Flynn.

Whether the Pence wedge between him and the inner circle (as of this week) is true hardly matters. Life in the capital wouldn't be much fun without believing such things. Washington's most powerful force is . . . the whisper.

Trumpians can launch a million outraged emails and tweets against all this incoming, but the blunt reality is, So what? If you aren't winning in Washington, you are losing. Nobody has changed the rules of that game yet.

For the first two weeks, Team Trump was winning. The executive orders unwinding the Obama

regulatory apparatus had Democrats gagging in astonishment. Having abandoned any arguments based on policy, the Democrats sank to the level of senior members like Sen. Elizabeth Warren exchanging views on TV with comedians. Comedians are now the Democratic Party's brain trust.

Then the White House overplayed its strong hand with the rushed-out immigration order. The political fires lit by that then consumed a vulnerable Mike Flynn and are now roaring toward the Oval Office. Unfair? Criminal? Maybe, and

maybe the historians will sort it all out someday as solace.

Forgotten now is that Nixon didn't resign because of anything proven by the anonymous torrent, but only after he saw he'd lost the support of his own party in Congress. We're not there, yet.

Mr. Trump is in the White House because voters wanted two things, in this order: 1) change; 2) Donald Trump.

That's the basics. Get it straight, or 1974 could return.



Milbank : Why do smart people in the White House do stupid things? Because Trump tells them to.

President Trump has just set the all-time speed record for scandal — from zero to Watergate in 25 days.

Not yet four weeks into the new administration, Washington has already revived a favorite parlor game based on Howard Baker's famous question in the Nixon era.

"What did President Trump know, and when did he know it?" asked conservative Max Boot.

Read These Comments

The best conversations on The Washington Post

Please provide a valid email address.

"What did President Trump know and when did he know it?" asked liberal Joan Walsh.

The Boston Globe, the Daily Mail, the Chicago Tribune and others asked variations of the same.

(Bastien Inzaurrede/The Washington Post)

President Trump on Feb. 15 faced renewed questions on whether his 2016 presidential campaign had contacts with Russian officials. Meanwhile, Trump's nominee for labor secretary, Andrew Puzder, withdrew a day before his confirmation hearing. President Trump on Feb. 15 faced renewed questions on whether his 2016 presidential campaign had contacts with Russian officials. (Bastien Inzaurrede/The Washington Post)

It's a have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife question, because there is no good answer. If Trump only just found out that Michael Flynn spoke to the Russians about sanctions, he's a dupe. If Trump knew earlier, he's been hiding something.

But the "What Did He Know?" game in this case may ask the wrong

question. The real question is not when Trump found out but whether Flynn, in his contacts with the ambassador, was doing Trump's bidding, at least implicitly. This would fit a pattern that has already developed in this White House: Trump's aides do exactly as he orders.

Flynn is no idiot. He spent a good chunk of his career in the intelligence business. He had to know that U.S. spy agencies listen to the Russian ambassador's phone calls — and he's savvy enough to know that his discussions with the ambassador about sanctions the Obama administration was imposing that day would make their way up the reporting chain. Finally, he had to know he couldn't pass it off as a casual contact; the two spoke several times that day.

So why do it? Perhaps for the same reason other smart people who work for Trump have done seemingly unwise things: Trump told them to.

Sean Spicer is a seasoned pro, deeply experienced with the press. So why would he, in his first full day on the job, destroy his credibility by berating reporters in the briefing room and peddling the bogus claim that Trump's inauguration crowd set a record? An explanation soon emerged: Trump himself had directed Spicer to do it.

Likewise, Kellyanne Conway, an old political hand, had to know she was breaking rules when she gave what she called a "free commercial" last week on Fox News for Ivanka Trump's fashion line: "Go buy it today, everybody." A bipartisan smackdown came swiftly and Spicer said she had been "counseled." Why do it?

Well, consider that the day after Conway's supposed transgression, she tweeted an Associated Press

report saying Trump had defended Conway to White House staffers, saying Spicer's "counseled" rebuke was "unfair to Conway," who was "merely sticking up" for Ivanka. On Tuesday, Conway tweeted another message indicating she parrots Trump: "I serve at the pleasure of [Trump]. His message is my message."

Next came Stephen Miller, the young Trump White House policy adviser who went on four Sunday talk shows and was widely pilloried for uttering extravagant untruths about voter fraud and for his attempt to assign absolute power to Trump. ("The powers of the president to protect our country . . . will not be questioned.") But when the performance was done, the president made clear Miller had done as Trump wanted, tweeting: "Congratulations Stephen Miller — on representing me this morning on the various Sunday morning shows. Great job!"

In Flynn's case, if he were freelancing with the Russians, Trump would justifiably be furious about the embarrassment and distraction it has caused. Trump never hesitates to attack those he thinks have wronged him. But the day after Flynn's calls to the ambassador, Russia made an unusual decision: It would not take the usual course of retaliating against the Obama administration's sanctions. And Trump tweeted his pleasure: "Great move on delay (by V. Putin) — I always knew he was very smart!"

Since then, Trump has uttered nary a word of criticism of Flynn. On Wednesday, he called Flynn "a wonderful man" who has "been treated very, very unfairly by the media."

No surprise here: Flynn's talks with the ambassador, Vladimir Putin's subsequent decision to postpone

retaliation, and Trump's applause for that decision are consistent with Trump's long-standing words and actions — selling property to the Russians; declining to release tax returns that could indicate whether Russians hold any of his debt; his early musings about Ukraine and NATO that have been more friendly to Moscow; his reluctance to criticize Putin's human-rights abuses or to acknowledge Russia's intervention to help him win the election; his surrounding himself with men — Paul Manafort, Carter Page, Roger Stone and Flynn — with ties to Moscow; and, now, confirmation of frequent contact between Russian intelligence and Trump's campaign.

Asking what Trump knew when, then, misses the more important question: Was Flynn acting under Trump's instructions?