

How U.S. intelligence agencies can find out what Trump told Putin

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A top-secret Special Collection Service has extraordinary capabilities to Hoover up intel from foreign adversaries.



Intelligence officers are hamstrung because even if they are able to get a full account of President Donald Trump's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, they would be limited in how they could use it without risking Trump's wrath. | Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP Photo

President Donald Trump's insistence on holding a one-on-one meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin hobbled U.S. intelligence agencies that would usually get an intimate look at such a sit-down, but American spies still have extraordinary capabilities to piece together what was discussed.

That's in large part due to the existence of a top-secret U.S. collection service that specializes in tapping adversaries' communications on the fly, including those of Putin's entourage at last week's summit in Helsinki.

Privately, sources familiar with U.S. intelligence capabilities expressed confidence that the so-called Special Collection Service scooped up not only Putin's readout of the two-hour meeting, but what the Kremlin's top spymasters really think about it — and how they're spinning it to their foreign counterparts.

That means the National Security Agency and CIA are at less of a strategic disadvantage than U.S. intelligence officials have acknowledged publicly. But because they likely are missing the one critical piece of intelligence they need the most — a word-by-word account of what Trump and Putin said during the meeting — those officials appear to be flying somewhat blind when it comes to fulfilling their most important mission of helping U.S. policymakers figure out what comes next.

“Most of the questions about what happened in Helsinki — and about the risks the president created there — are skipping over a more fundamental concern: How can intel officers effectively support policy, at any level, when only the president knows what the policy is?” asks David Priess, a former CIA officer and daily White House intelligence briefer. “If, one-on-one with Putin, the president made or changed policy, and he refuses to tell anyone exactly what happened, how can the national security bureaucracy prepare the memos and talking points for future meetings to be held about those very policies?”

If his public statements are to be believed, Dan Coats, Trump’s director of national intelligence, revealed last week that he does not have full visibility into what was discussed, and that there’s a “risk” Putin had secretly recorded the meeting.

A DNI spokesperson said Monday that Coats has said nothing publicly to indicate that his position has changed. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders declined to directly answer questions on Monday about whether Trump has fully briefed top intelligence officers about his sit-down with Putin, and whether he relied solely on memory, or took notes.

“The president has met and consulted with all of his national security team,” Sanders said at the briefing. “I’m not going to go into the specific details on how the president interacts every single time with his national security team.”

Meanwhile, Trump himself keeps teasing out his version of the discussion.

“When you hear the Fake News talking negatively about my meeting with President Putin, and all that I gave up, remember, I gave up NOTHING, we merely talked about future benefits for both countries,” Trump tweeted on Monday morning.

The irony of Trump himself being the one obstacle preventing them from confirming his claim conclusively — and getting a full picture of what happened in Helsinki — is not lost on current and former U.S. intelligence officials.

Under virtually any other president, some told POLITICO, audio and video recordings of such a critical event would be a given, especially if there wasn’t a top aide in the room specifically there to take detailed notes. That is also something that Putin’s side most certainly possesses. U.S. intelligence analysts would want to parse every word, facial expression and change in body language of Trump and his wily adversary, and share their findings with the White House, Congress, U.S. military and diplomatic leaders, and their many intelligence allies around the world.

Instead, former NSA senior signals intelligence analyst John Schindler says it appears that “the only way they’re learning about what was said in that closed-door meeting is through NSA reporting, top-secret code-word reporting, about what the Russians say was said in that meeting. And what the French foreign ministry and, insert other country here, think happened in Helsinki based on what the Russians told them.”

“Obviously, this is so crazy that no one thought this would happen,” Schindler said of the U.S. intelligence agencies scramble to figure out what, exactly, a sitting U.S. president said in a meeting with a known belligerent adversary. “The really important stuff from an intelligence viewpoint is what we collect on the meeting. But because there’s no U.S. version to check it against, the Russians could be lying about it and we wouldn’t even know.”

The ultimate, and most frustrating, irony of all for the intelligence community? “Eventually we are going to wind up with every version of what happened,” Schindler said, “except Trump’s.”

Intelligence officers are especially hamstrung because even if they are able to get a full account of the meeting, they would be extremely limited in how they could use it without risking Trump’s wrath. Given his intention to have the meeting remain between him and Putin, he could even claim that any collection done without his permission is therefore illegal.

James Bamford, author of four books on how the NSA operates, said it is indeed illegal for the NSA and CIA to intercept the communications of Americans — domestically or overseas — unless they give their express approval. The agencies also could seek a special intelligence-gathering warrant, usually by demonstrating that the people in question are acting as agents of a foreign power, as was the case with former Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.

“And I don’t think Trump would appreciate that,” Bamford said. “The NSA is a bureaucracy in which people only do what they are ordered to do if it comes from the top down. So there’s not a chance in hell that anyone would have eavesdropped on the president of the United States without express prior authorization.”

U.S. intelligence officials made clear their concerns about Trump going it alone with Putin long before the specifics of the Helsinki meeting were finalized. But those concerns went through the roof as those officials witnessed Trump’s erratic behavior during the chaotic news conference immediately following it.

For his part, Trump publicly sided with Putin over his own security agencies regarding Russia’s hacking of the 2016 presidential election, and said both countries were to blame, while later claiming that he delivered tough talk during their private session. Putin suggested that Trump had made significant concessions on several key security issues, including Syria.

What was also alarming to some veteran American spies, they said in interviews, was Trump's behavior — slump-shouldered and deferential to Putin, who has long boasted about his ability to manipulate rivals when left alone with them.

One former senior intelligence official said Coats likely was referring to that broader Trump-Putin dynamic when making his statement last week during an event at the Aspen Security Forum.

Rather than say he didn't know what Trump discussed with Putin, Coats said, "I don't know what happened in that meeting," adding, "If he had asked me how that ought to be conducted, I would have suggested a different way."

Because the summit was finalized just a few weeks beforehand, U.S. intelligence officials had to scramble to get their agents, analysts and technical collectors in position to eavesdrop on an event that had the potential of being one of the most consequential of Trump's presidency, according to current and former U.S. officials. The Special Collection Service, the ultraclassified team of NSA and CIA interceptors, no doubt began moving into position as soon as the decision was made, they said.

The SCS has operated so deeply in the shadows that even its existence, and its name, were unknown to public for decades. In 2013, explosive details about its operations emerged into public view, when former U.S. intelligence contractor Edward Snowden leaked a massive trove of NSA documents to journalists.

The unit, sometimes code-named STATEROOM, often has provided Washington with a decisive advantage during trade talks and political negotiations at the United Nations, within range of U.S. embassies overseas and at remote locations such as the meeting in Helsinki. [But the Snowden documents sparked a firestorm of criticism, including details about how SCS](#) systematically had wiretapped German Chancellor Angela Merkel's private cellphone for a decade as part of a massive electronic dragnet covering dozens of European and Latin American leaders.

In Helsinki, other elements of the vast U.S. security apparatus also mobilized, and so did the spy agencies of American allies like Britain, neutral countries like Finland itself and adversaries like China, a neighbor of Russia that is also the biggest U.S. trading partner, according to Bamford and some former U.S. intelligence officials. All of them would be intent on vacuuming up whatever they could from the summit, both on the ground and via electronic intercepts and so-called signals intelligence.

That made the capital of Finland the modern-day equivalent of Vienna in the run-up to the summit meeting; an international crossroads for spooks of all stripes and nationalities. U.S. officials considered it a given that Russia would deploy an unprecedented number of intelligence operatives to Helsinki, a coastal city just 188 miles west of perhaps the Kremlin's biggest spy hub, St. Petersburg.

But U.S. intelligence agencies were at a disadvantage from the start, some current and former officials said.

Under established protocols, Coats or other intelligence leaders would brief top White House officials, and possibly Trump or national security adviser John Bolton, about what the NSA, CIA and other agencies were capable of doing before, during and after the summit.

What actually transpired during that process, including whether Trump and his team specifically shot down the use of any particular collection capabilities, is among the most closely guarded and classified secrets. The NSA, CIA and intelligence directorate all declined comment.

Current and former officials agreed with Bamford that those agencies, the NSA in particular, would steer far clear of using their immensely intrusive collection capabilities against American targets, especially Trump and his aides and Marina Gross, who as Trump's translator, was the only other non-Russian in the room.

Ideally, U.S. intelligence officials would be able to watch video of the event to see the interaction between Trump and Putin, and to look for other hints, such as whether the Russian president was being fed intelligence that his side had learned during the meeting itself.

Trump isn't the first president to go it alone with such a formidable Cold War adversary. President Ronald Reagan did so with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, but he provided detailed and public readouts afterward.

In Trump's case, U.S. intelligence officials were especially suspicious about his insistence on privacy even before the meeting, due to his already cozy relationship with Putin despite several U.S. investigations that already had concluded that Putin personally approved of the Russian election campaign.

Two former intelligence officials said they were more concerned, for the first time in memory, about what their own leader said and did than their adversary.

So Trump's comments in the news conference afterward prompted even more concern among intelligence officials about whether Trump made promises that went against U.S. interests on issues like Crimea, Syria, Iran and nuclear weapons — and whether they would be able to figure out what really happened.

Trump's overall refusal to criticize Putin, and his praise for Putin's "incredible offer" to do an interrogation swap of Russian intelligence officers and prominent Americans including former Ambassador Michael McFaul were especially noteworthy, the former officials said.

Afterward, Democrats on Capitol Hill pushed unsuccessfully to compel Gross to testify before Congress about what transpired during the meeting. Trump's own White House has tried to tamp down the significance of the entire event, saying, essentially, that it resulted in no agreements or commitments of any kind.

The Russians have gone into overdrive since Helsinki, with TASS and other state-run news organizations pumping out one story after another about how Russia is moving forward on issues for which Trump offered concessions.

For their part, U.S. intelligence officials have been spending more time and energy just trying to figure out whether Trump did, in fact, make concessions, and whether he revealed things he shouldn't have, according to Schindler, Priess and Peter Harrell, a senior Obama administration State Department official familiar with summits like Helsinki.

"We've let the Russians shape, publicly and privately, what was allegedly agreed to in the meeting," said Harrell, "with no coherent ability for the U.S. to push back."

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