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## CIA Prepping for Possible Cyber Strike Against Russia

by WILLIAM M. ARKIN, KEN DILANIAN and ROBERT WINDREM

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The Obama administration is contemplating an unprecedented cyber covert action against Russia in retaliation for alleged Russian interference in the American presidential election, U.S. intelligence officials told NBC News.

Current and former officials with direct knowledge of the situation say the CIA has been asked to deliver options to the White House for a wide-ranging "clandestine" cyber operation designed to harass and "embarrass" the Kremlin leadership.

The sources did not elaborate on the exact measures the CIA was considering, but said the agency had already begun opening cyber doors, selecting targets and making other preparations for an operation. Former intelligence officers told NBC News that the agency had gathered reams of documents that could expose unsavory tactics by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Vice President Joe Biden told "Meet the Press" moderator Chuck Todd on Friday that "we're sending a message" to Putin and that "it will be at the time of our choosing, and under the circumstances that will have the greatest impact."

When asked if the American public will know a message was sent, the vice president replied, "Hope not."

Retired Admiral James Stavridis told NBC News' Cynthia McFadden that the U.S. should attack Russia's ability to censor its internal internet traffic and expose the financial dealings of Putin and his associates.

**"PROBE WITH BAYONETS. WHEN YOU HIT MUSH, PROCEED. WHEN YOU HIT STEEL WITHDRAW."**

"It's well known that there's great deal of offshore money moved outside of Russia from oligarchs," he said. "It would be very embarrassing if that was revealed, and that would be a proportional response to what we've seen" in Russia's alleged hacks and leaks targeting U.S. public opinion.

Sean Kanuck, who was until this spring the senior U.S. intelligence official responsible for analyzing Russian cyber capabilities, said not mounting a response would carry a cost.

"If you publicly accuse someone," he said, "and don't follow it up with a responsive action, that may weaken the credible threat of your response capability."

President Obama will ultimately have to decide whether he will authorize a CIA operation. Officials told NBC News that for now there are divisions at the top of the administration about whether to proceed.

Two former CIA officers who worked on Russia told NBC News that there is a long history of the White House asking the CIA to come up with options for covert action against Russia, including cyber options — only to abandon the idea.

"We've always hesitated to use a lot of stuff we've had, but that's a political decision," one former officer said. "If someone has decided, 'We've had enough of the Russians,' there is a lot we can do. Step one is to remind them that two can play at this game and we have a lot of stuff. Step two, if you are looking to mess with their networks, we can do that, but then the issue becomes, they can do worse things to us in other places."

A second former officer, who helped run intelligence operations against Russia, said he was asked several times in recent years to work on covert action plans, but "none of the options were particularly good, nor did we think that any of them would be particularly effective," he said.

Putin is almost beyond embarrassing, he said, and anything the U.S. can do against, for example, Russian bank accounts, the Russian can do in response.

"Do you want to have Barack Obama bouncing checks?" he asked.

Former CIA deputy director Michael Morell expressed skepticism that the U.S. would go so far as to attack Russian networks.

"Physical attacks on networks is not something the U.S. wants to do because we don't want to set a precedent for other countries to do it as well, including against us," he said. "My own view is that our response shouldn't be covert -- it should overt, for everybody to see."

The Obama administration is debating just that question, officials say — whether to respond to Russia via cyber means, or with traditional measures such as sanctions.

The CIA's cyber operation is being prepared by a team within the CIA's Center for Cyber Intelligence, documents indicate. According to officials, the team has a staff of hundreds and a budget in the hundreds of millions, they say.

The covert action plan is designed to protect the U.S. election system and insure that Russian hackers can't interfere with the November vote, officials say. Another goal is to send a message to Russia that it has crossed a line, officials say.

While the National Security Agency is the center for American digital spying, the CIA is the lead agency for covert action and has its own cyber capabilities. It sometimes brings in the NSA and the Pentagon to help, officials say.

In earlier days, the CIA was behind efforts to use the internet to put pressure on Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in 1999, and to pressure Iraqi leadership in 2003 to split off from Saddam Hussein.

According to documents leaked by Edward Snowden, the CIA requested \$685.4 million for computer network operations in 2013, compared to \$1 billion by the NSA.

Retired Gen. Mike Hayden, who ran the CIA after leading the NSA, wrote this year: "We even had our own cyber force, the Information Operations Center (IOC), that former CIA director George Tenet launched and which had grown steadily under the next spy chief, Porter Goss, and me. The CIA didn't try to replicate or try to compete with NSA... the IOC was a lot like Marine Corps aviation while NSA was an awful lot like America's Air Force."

"I would quote a Russian proverb," said Adm. Stavridis, "which is, 'Probe with bayonets. When you hit mush, proceed. When you hit steel withdraw.' I think unless we stand up to this kind of cyber attack from Russia, we'll only see more and more of it in the future."

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