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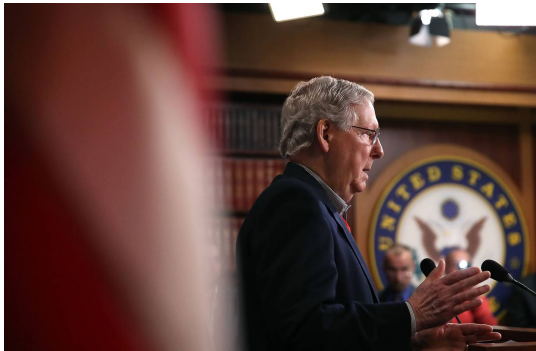
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POLITICS

Republican Leaders Join Call for Probe of Russian Hacking of U.S. Election

Donald Trump is increasingly alone in questioning whether Moscow stole emails from Democrats and Hillary Clinton's campaign



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, shown on Monday at the Capitol, wants the Senate intelligence panel to investigate Russian hacking of the U.S. presidential election. PHOTO: MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

By **SHANE HARRIS** and **SIOBHAN HUGHES**

Updated Dec. 13, 2016 3:06 a.m. ET

Momentum to hold investigations into alleged Russian hacking during the U.S. presidential election picked up steam on Monday, with the Senate's top Republican joining Democrats, the White House and other GOP leaders in calls for a probe, despite repeated dismissals by President-elect Donald Trump of intelligence assessments of the hacking.

As the furor mounted on Monday, Mr. Trump was left nearly alone among political leaders in questioning the conclusion that Russia stole emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign, and leaked them in an effort to interfere with the election. He said in a Twitter message that the allegations amounted to a "conspiracy theory."

The burgeoning controversy helped galvanize suspicion among Democrats and Republicans alike toward Moscow, with political anxieties spilling into Mr. Trump's choice of Exxon Mobil Corp. Chief Executive Rex Tillerson as secretary of state. Mr. Tillerson has business connections to Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Exxon has pursued ventures with the Russian government. Several lawmakers said they would closely question such ties.

In one sign of the growing urgency, 10 members of the Electoral College sent an open letter to James Clapper, director of national intelligence, saying that in order to fulfill their constitutional obligations, they needed to know "whether there are ongoing investigations into ties between Donald Trump, his campaign or associates, and Russian government interference in the election."

THE TRUMP TRANSITION



Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta, whose emails were stolen by hackers and released by WikiLeaks, said her campaign supports the electors' efforts to disclose more findings.

"Faithless" electors, who cast a ballot for someone other than the candidate they are pledged to support, often have been a part of presidential politics. But so far, no faithless electors have ever managed to swing the outcome of a presidential election. Still, the level of activity surrounding the Electoral College vote is unprecedented in recent memory. An organized effort among electors to overturn the result was part of the 1960 election, when several electors of both parties cast votes for a conservative Democrat senator, but didn't prevent the election of John F. Kennedy.

U.S. intelligence officials for months have been investigating the alleged hacking, which Russia has repeatedly denied. Intelligence officials said in a statement in October, before the election, that they were confident Russia committed the cyberattacks to influence U.S. elections.

The Central Intelligence Agency earlier this month briefed senators that the Russian interference appeared intended to aid Mr. Trump. Democratic and GOP lawmakers have called for investigations by congressional committees or by an independent panel.

Mr. Trump in recent days has sharply attacked the intelligence assessments as "ridiculous," saying he doesn't believe them and mentioning the CIA's incorrect 2003 intelligence assessments about Iraq's weapons programs.

"Can you imagine if the election results were the opposite and WE tried to play the Russia/CIA card. It would be called conspiracy theory!" Mr. Trump tweeted Monday morning.

He also has continued to insist there was no evidence pointing to Russia and suggested the conclusions of all U.S. intelligence agencies to the contrary were based on flawed methods. "Unless you catch 'hackers' in the act, it is very hard to determine who was doing the hacking," Mr. Trump also said on Twitter Monday morning.

But private security experts did in fact monitor hackers stealing emails from the networks of the DNC. Those emails were later published by WikiLeaks.

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Mr. Trump appeared to lose a key ally in the dispute Monday when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said he supported an inquiry, effectively guaranteeing that some probe will occur.

“Any foreign breach of our cybersecurity measures is disturbing, and I strongly condemn any such efforts,” Mr. McConnell said. He added, “This simply cannot be a partisan issue,” and said the Senate Intelligence Committee “is more than capable of conducting a complete review of this matter.”

Mr. McConnell also expressed his support for the CIA, just days after Mr. Trump took his public shot at the agency. “I have the highest confidence in the intelligence community and especially the Central Intelligence Agency,” Mr. McConnell said. “The CIA is filled with selfless patriots, many of whom anonymously risked their lives for the American people.”

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) issued a more general statement condemning “any state-sponsored cyberattacks.” But he lined up with Mr. Trump in warning of the risk of altering the outcome of the election. “As we work to protect our democracy from foreign influence, we should not cast doubt on the clear and decisive outcome of this election,” Mr. Ryan said in a statement.

The Obama administration also backed a congressional inquiry. Josh Earnest, the White House spokesman, said there is no dispute that Russia was behind the cyberattacks, and added that it appeared clear the efforts were aimed at helping Mr. Trump, noting there had been no leaks of Republicans’ emails.

“You didn’t need a security clearance to figure out who benefited from malicious Russian cyberactivity,” Mr. Earnest said.

While investigations now appear certain, it remains unclear what type of probe will take place, amid some divisions between Republicans and Democrats. That decision also could determine which findings ultimately are shared with the public.

Some Democrats favor an independent panel patterned after the commission that probed the Sept. 11 attacks.

The Senate intelligence panel, which Mr. McConnell suggested should be in charge, normally conducts hearings in secret. The committee never released in full its lengthy probe of harsh interrogation methods used by the CIA. Its members already have been briefed in closed sessions on the information collected by intelligence agencies that points to Russia.

Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and John McCain of Arizona, both longtime Russia hawks, have said they intend to launch an investigation via the Senate Armed Services Committee, which Mr. McCain chairs.

On Sunday, Mr. McCain said on CBS’s “Face the Nation” that in an ideal world, the Senate would establish a select committee to look into Russian hacking, but that setting it up would take a long time.

Democrats have said more information needs to be disclosed urgently and have called on the Obama administration to disclose the findings of a review that the White House ordered intelligence agencies to undertake. President Barack Obama has said he expects that probe to wrap up before he leaves office on Jan. 20.

“The seriousness of the Russian meddling...during our presidential election merits a bicameral and bipartisan congressional investigation,” Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, said in a statement. Mr. Schiff said the joint inquiry should include public hearings, similar to those held after the Sept. 11 attacks, and should develop a plan for “deterring the Russians from further malignant cyberaction and inoculating the public against such manipulation in the future.”

But the intelligence panel’s Republican chairman, Rep. Devin Nunes of California, has said there was no need for further investigations, though he wrote intelligence officials on Monday to demand they brief his committee on the shifting assessments of the cyberhacking, citing recent news reports. Mr. Nunes, who is also an adviser to the Trump transition team, had previously said he has seen no evidence that the hacks were meant to help Mr. Trump win the election, a position directly at odds with Mr. Schiff, who has said they plainly were.

—Byron Tau
and Carol E. Lee

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contributed to this article.

Write to Siobhan Hughes at siobhan.hughes@wsj.com

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