

Trump said to plan expulsion of Russian envoys over UK nerve-agent attack

WASHINGTON (BLOOMBERG) - President Donald Trump is preparing to expel dozens of Russian diplomats from the United States in response to the nerve-agent poisoning of a former Russian spy in Britain, two people familiar with the matter said on Saturday (March 24).

Mr Trump agreed with the recommendation of advisers and the expulsions are likely to be announced on Monday, the people said, though they cautioned that Mr Trump's decision may not be final.

The president is prepared to act but first wants to be sure that European allies will take similar steps against Russia, aides said.

US officials are working through the weekend to develop a coordinated response with the Europeans, one of the people said, after British Prime Minister Theresa May rallied support for a tough rebuke.

As early as Monday, a number of European nations also are expected to expel Russian officials, including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Czech Republic. France and Germany backed Mrs May's call for tougher action, though their exact plans are less clear.

The US considers the diplomats to be spies, carrying out intelligence activities under cover as embassy staff, one of the people said.

Mr Trump's action would follow a similar move by Mrs May, who ordered 23 Russians that she said were spies to leave Britain over the attack on the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter.

The advisers reached recommendations for a US response to the UK attack at a National Security Council meeting last Wednesday and honed the proposals last Friday.

Mr Trump discussed the issue last Friday with US Ambassador to Russia Jon

Huntsman, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, FBI Director Chris Wray, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, Defence Secretary James Mattis, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, outgoing National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and others, two people said.

All of the people familiar with the discussions asked not to be identified.

Deputy White House Press Secretary Raj Shah told Bloomberg on Saturday: “The United States stands firmly with the United Kingdom in condemning Russia’s outrageous action. The president is always considering options to hold Russia accountable in response to its malign activities. We have no announcements at this time.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment.

RUSSIA DIVISIONS

A battle within the White House over how to best address the provocations of Russian President Vladimir Putin has been intensifying. The internal divisions flared after Mr Trump congratulated Mr Putin on his recent re-election without first reviewing written guidance that he not do so, a person familiar with the matter said.

Mr Trump has, meanwhile, reshaped his national security staff.

Last Thursday, he announced he would replace General McMaster, who favoured a tougher public posture towards Mr Putin, with Mr John Bolton, the former ambassador to the United Nations who has promoted military action against Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

That move came just a week after the president fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who had also adopted a more confrontational stance toward Russia, and nominated Mr Mike Pompeo, the CIA director, to replace him.

Congress has pressured Mr Trump to get tougher on Mr Putin and passed legislation last August giving lawmakers the power to block the president from lifting punitive US measures imposed after Russia’s incursion into Ukraine.

Substantively, Washington’s policy towards Russia has become tougher in recent months, though Mr Trump’s critics say he has dragged his feet in responding to

Mr Putin's provocations.

RELATIONSHIP PRIORITY

Mr Trump has agreed to adopt increasingly tough policy stances on Russia. But the president places a priority on maintaining a personal relationship with the Russian president, would not publicly attack him, and does not see any benefit to the US in confronting Mr Putin in one-on-one encounters, an administration official said last Thursday.

Mr Trump defended his call with Mr Putin on Twitter last Wednesday, dismissing those who "wanted me to excoriate him".

"They are wrong!" Mr Trump wrote. "Getting along with Russia (and others) is a good thing, not a bad thing."

Mrs May earlier this month condemned Russia for the nerve-agent attack that critically injured the former Russian spy and his daughter. A British police officer was also hospitalised.

Mrs May said the 23 Russians she ordered to leave Britain were undeclared spies, and she has sought the cooperation of other countries in her campaign to punish Moscow.

Ms Heather Nauert, a State Department spokesman, said last Friday night that "the United States is considering a range of options to respond to Russia's outrageous actions in the UK, both to demonstrate our solidarity with our ally and to hold Russia accountable for its clear breach of international norms and agreements".

She added that the State Department "doesn't have any actions to announce today".

Regardless of Mr Trump's rhetoric, his administration sees the Kremlin as a threat.

A national defence strategy assembled by the Pentagon under Mr Mattis and publicly summarised in January described China and Russia as the top global adversaries of the US.

Earlier this month, the administration slapped financial sanctions against a St Petersburg-based internet “troll farm” and its alleged owner – a close Putin ally – whom Special Counsel Robert Mueller indicted over a covert social media campaign to influence the 2016 election.

Source: <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/trump-said-to-plan-expulsion-of-russian-envoys-over-uk-nerve-agent-attack>

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