

Inside the CIA and NSA disagreement over Russian bounties story

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Did Russia's GRU military intelligence service pay the Taliban bounties to kill American military personnel in Afghanistan? It's unclear. The intelligence community has given neither former President Donald Trump or President Joe Biden a high confidence assessment that such incidents occurred. But that's not the end of the story.

For the CIA in particular, this is very much an open matter.

Primarily responsible for the collection of human intelligence, the CIA has moderate confidence that a compartmentalized unit of the GRU did indeed pay bounties for the explicit purpose of killing Americans. I'm led to believe that the CIA's basis for this assessment has five key foundations.

First, information gathered from detainee interviews and related U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

Second, detected financial flows between the GRU, its intermediaries, and Taliban officers.

Third, highly sensitive and reliable reporting from agents (human sources) inside and outside of the Taliban network (some of this reporting is so sensitive that the CIA delayed sharing it with America's closest foreign partners).

Fourth, assessment of the GRU's established covert actions in Afghanistan. It has previously been established with high confidence, for example, that the GRU has supported active combat Taliban elements with funding, explicitly anti-U.S. tactical guidance, and weaponry.

Fifth, Vladimir Putin's particular ideological animus for the United States and historic animus over 1980s U.S. actions against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. At least under its current chief, Igor Kostyukov, the GRU is a near-perfect physical manifestation of this anti-Americanism (in the coming days, I will report on another case of the GRU's exceptionally aggressive anti-U.S. activity).

In contrast, both the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, despite sharing the CIA's concerns over Russia's intelligence activity in Afghanistan, lack the independent intelligence reporting to corroborate the CIA's bounty assessment. The NSA is particularly relevant as pertaining to the intelligence community assessments previously given to Trump, and now, to Biden.

The NSA casts a wide net in terms of signal (phones, cyber, computers, etc.) intelligence collection targeting the Russian government. Were the bounties story legitimate, the NSA believes it would have intercepted, or at least detected, communications relating to such bounties. An important point to note here is that the NSA believes this, in spite of known Russian efforts to disrupt and misinform NSA collection activities. On the most sensitive Russian intelligence operations (as any bounties payments for American bodies would obviously be), Russian operatives take great pains to avoid communication not simply with Moscow but also with their relevant embassy stations. They do so not simply to avoid being caught but to avoid being caught up in the NSA's exceptionally capable metadata mining and profiling software. From Putin on down, Russian officials also regularly share fictions on encrypted lines they believe the NSA may have penetrated.

Top line: I understand that the NSA does not currently have evidence of GRU officers credibly talking about paying the Taliban to kill Americans. Nor does the NSA have more tangential data-based evidence, such as detection of burner cellphones used by compartmentalized GRU officers in proximity to burner cellphones used by Taliban officers responsible for U.S.-targeting efforts (this contrasts, for example, with the NSA's dead-to-rights evidence against the Russian FSB in the aftermath of its bungled August 2020 assassination attempt against Alexei Navalny).

This separation between the CIA and NSA is important. To guard against groupthink and confirmation bias (see weapons of mass destruction, circa 2003), the NSA must base its intelligence assessments on its own collection activities, not on what it wants to find.

This leaves the bounties story as an open case that lacks the evidence to justify presidential-level policy responses.