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POLITICS

Contradicting Trump on Russia: Russian Officials

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG FEB. 20, 2017

WASHINGTON — For months, President Trump and his aides have insisted that they had no contact with Russian officials during the presidential campaign, a denial Mr. Trump repeated last week.

“I have nothing to do with Russia,” he told reporters on Thursday. “To the best of my knowledge, no person that I deal with does.”

The denial stands at odds with statements by Russian officials, who have at least twice acknowledged contacts with aides to Mr. Trump before the election.

It is not uncommon for a presidential campaign to speak to foreign officials, which makes the dispute particularly unusual. At the same time, any contacts would have taken place during a period when American intelligence agencies believe the Russian government was trying to disrupt the election with a campaign of computer hacking.

The dispute began two days after the Nov. 8 election, when Sergei A. Ryabkov, the Russian deputy foreign minister, said his government had maintained contacts with members of Mr. Trump’s “immediate entourage” during the campaign.

“I cannot say that all, but a number of them maintained contacts with Russian representatives,” Mr. Ryabkov said during an interview with the Interfax news agency.

Mr. Ryabkov’s comments were met with a swift denial from Hope Hicks, a spokeswoman for Mr. Trump and now a member of the White House press team.

More recently, Russia’s ambassador to Washington, Sergey I. Kislyak, told The Washington Post that he had communicated frequently during the campaign with Michael T. Flynn, a close campaign adviser to Mr. Trump who became the president’s national security adviser before resigning from the position last week.

“It’s something all diplomats do,” The Post quoted Mr. Kislyak as saying, though he refused to say what subjects they discussed.

Mr. Trump and his aides denied any contacts occurred during the campaign.

“This is a nonstory because to the best of our knowledge, no contacts took place, so it’s hard to make a comment on something that never happened,” Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a White House spokeswoman, said on Monday.

The Russian government did not respond to a message over the weekend seeking comment.

Separately, The New York Times and other news outlets reported last week that Trump campaign advisers and other associates of Mr. Trump’s had repeated contacts last year with Russian intelligence officials. Those reports, citing anonymous current and former American government officials, were vigorously denied by the White House.

On Thursday, Mr. Trump made clear his annoyance when questioned about contacts with Russia.

“How many times do I have to answer this question? Russia is a ruse. I have nothing to do with Russia,” he said during a White House news conference.

The president also lashed out at “illegal” leaks for bringing down Mr. Flynn, who the White House has acknowledged had multiple conversations after the election — in late December — with Mr. Kislyak about sanctions that were being imposed by the Obama administration.

Under ordinary circumstances, few in Washington would blink at the statements by Mr. Ryabkov or Mr. Kislyak. It is common for foreign governments to reach out to American presidential candidates, and many foreign diplomats believe it is part of their job to get to know people who may soon be crucial to maintaining alliances or repairing broken relationships.

“They want to better understand policy views of a particular candidate so they can perhaps make their case for certain policies,” said Derek Chollet, who was part of the Obama transition in 2008 and then served in senior roles at the State Department, the White House and the Pentagon.

Mostly, though, “it’s about relationship building — they want to get to know the people who are possibly going to be in important jobs,” he added.

The closest contacts between campaigns and foreign officials tend to be with allies. The Australian Embassy said it was in contact with the Trump and Clinton campaigns, and British officials said they had extensive contacts with the president’s top aides in the months before the election.

Contacts with potential adversaries, such as Russia, are also not unusual, but they are more complicated. Michael McFaul, who advised the Obama campaign in 2008 and later served as United States ambassador to Russia, said that he traveled to Moscow during the presidential race that year and that “everyone in Moscow knew that I was advising the campaign.”

The American Embassy even hosted a lunch for him with Russian officials. But “I was not there to discuss Obama policy but to better inform my views on Russian attitudes about U.S.-Russia relations,” Mr. McFaul said.

He said that during the transition, Russian officials wanted to talk about policy issues, but the Obama administration officials refused — in keeping with the

tradition that there should be only “one president at a time.”

Correction: February 21, 2017

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Mr. Trump visited Israel during the presidential campaign.

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A version of this article appears in print on February 21, 2017, on Page A16 of the New York edition with the headline: Contradicting Trump on Russia: Remarks From Russian Officials.

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