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NATIONAL SECURITY

China and Russia, Aligned More Closely, Seen as Chief Security Threat to U.S.

The two nations are pouring resources into a 'race for technological and military superiority,' annual intelligence report says

From left: FBI Director Christopher Wray, CIA Director Gina Haspel and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Tuesday. **PHOTO:** JOSHUA ROBERTS/REUTERS

By Dustin Volz and Warren P. Strobel

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WASHINGTON—U.S. intelligence officials warned Tuesday of increased threats to national security from tighter cooperation between China and Russia, while also differing with President Trump in their analysis of North Korea's nuclear intentions and the current danger posed by Islamic State.

The warnings were contained in an annual threat assessment that accompanied testimony by Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Chris Wray, Central Intelligence Agency Director Gina Haspel and other leaders of the U.S. intelligence community, who appeared Tuesday before a Senate panel. The annual exercise affords the public a look at imminent challenges facing the country, such as cyberattacks, nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

The assessment cautioned that Beijing and Moscow are pouring resources into a "race for technological and military superiority" that will define the 21st century. It said the two countries are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s.

While the U.S.'s traditional military remains generally unmatched, both adversaries have increasingly relied on cyber theft, espionage and online influence campaigns to achieve political and economic gain, while expanding their capabilities for disruptive cyber operations, the assessment said.

As China and Russia seek to exert more influence regionally and globally, alliances between the U.S. and its Western allies have weakened, the report said. "Some U.S. allies and partners are seeking greater independence from Washington in response to their perceptions of changing U.S. policies on security and trade," it said.

Since becoming president, Mr. Trump has appeared to question the value of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance and U.S. military commitments in Afghanistan, the Middle East and South Korea. On trade, he has rejected multilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and imposed tariffs on imports from both allies and adversaries in an effort to secure better terms for the U.S.

The efforts by China and Russia could lead to a higher risk of regional conflicts, particularly in the Middle East and East Asia, the report found.

Some lawmakers on the Senate Intelligence Committee appeared taken aback by the assessment that China and Russia are growing closer, likely to the detriment of the U.S. "If those two countries begin to work together systemically, that could be a big problem for us," said Sen. Angus King, a Maine independent who caucuses with the Democrats.

The report also said U.S. adversaries are likely already targeting the 2020 presidential election with online influence operations akin to those launched by Russia during the 2016 election cycle. The rise of so-called deep fakes—technology that can create convincing but false video and audio—probably will make online influence campaigns more potent, the report said.

"We are now living in a new age—a time characterized by hybrid warfare and weaponized disinformation, all occurring within the context of a world producing more data than mankind has ever seen," Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, the Republican chairman of the intelligence committee, said in opening remarks.

The annual threat report doesn't recommend policies and typically hasn't spurred specific policy changes. But it has served in the past to highlight emerging threats, such as cybersecurity or information warfare, and accelerate public and congressional discussion of them.

While last year's threat hearing focused largely on Russia and the rising security concerns presented by the Kremlin's use of information warfare, Tuesday's exercise proved more varied as senators peppered the intelligence chiefs with security matters spanning the globe.

Cyberwar received central billing in the report, as is has for several years. China for the first time was described as capable of launching cyberattacks that could disable U.S. critical infrastructure "such as disruption of a natural gas pipeline for days to weeks," it said.

The intelligence leaders' assessment also differed with President Trump in its analysis of North Korea, Syria, Iraq and other hot spots. The intelligence leaders, when pressed by senators about those apparent contradictions, were muted in offering any response that would directly disagree with the president.

On North Korea, the assessment raised questions about President Trump's predictions that he will be able to persuade Pyongyang to give up all of its nuclear weapons. While North Korea "has reversibly dismantled portions of its [weapons of mass destruction] infrastructure," the report said, U.S. intelligence "continues to assess that it is unlikely to give up all of its WMD stockpiles, delivery systems, and production capabilities. North Korean leaders view nuclear arms as critical to regime survival."

On Iran, Mr. Coats said U.S. intelligence officials didn't believe the nation was developing a nuclear weapon, challenging assertions from Mr. Trump that the nuclear pact he withdrew the U.S. from last year was ineffective. Mr. Trump made withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal—reached in 2015 between the Middle Eastern power, the U.S. and five other nations—one of his most prominent foreign policy goals.

"We do not believe Iran is currently undertaking the key activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device," Mr. Coats said.

Ms. Haspel told senators: "They are making some preparations that would increase their ability to take a step back" from the deal but "at the moment, technically, they are in compliance" with the 2015 pact.

Mr. Trump has also justified plans to withdraw troops from Syria by arguing that Islamic State was defeated. But the intelligence assessment said the terror group would "very likely continue to pursue external attacks from Iraq and Syria against regional and western adversaries, including the United States."

The report also didn't include a national security justification for building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, a priority of Mr. Trump's that he has repeatedly described as necessary to combat a critical security crisis—though it did say drug trafficking from Mexico posed a growing risk to American public health and safety and that U.S.-bound illegal migration from

Latin America showed "no signs of abating." Officials weren't asked about border issues in the hearing.

According to experts, most drugs from Mexico enter the U.S. hidden in vehicles that travel through legal ports of entry.

Intelligence leaders also declined to directly answer several questions, saying they would be more appropriate to discuss in a classified setting. Pressed by Sen. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) on whether the CIA had concluded the that the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, was responsible for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year, as a Senate resolution unanimously declared, Ms. Haspel largely demurred.

—*Joshua Jamerson contributed to this article.*

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