

Russian spy unit suspected of directed-energy attacks on U.S. personnel

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Exclusive

CIA Director William Burns is now receiving daily briefings on the investigation.



This Saturday, July 14, 2018 file photo shows the building of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, also know as Russian military intelligence service, or GRU, in Moscow, Russia.

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U.S. officials suspect that a notorious Russian spy agency may be behind alleged attacks that are causing mysterious health issues among U.S. government personnel across the world, according to three current and former officials with direct knowledge of the discussions.

Officials do not have a smoking gun linking Russia's military intelligence unit, the GRU, to the suspected directed-energy incidents, said the people, who were not authorized to speak publicly. The intelligence community has not reached a consensus or made a formal determination. However, officials have told lawmakers that they have intensified their

investigation in recent weeks to include all 18 federal intelligence agencies, and that it is focused on the GRU's potential involvement, according to a congressional official briefed on the matter.

A White House spokesperson, who requested anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, emphasized that investigators do not yet know the cause of these incidents or whether they constitute an attack by foreign actors. However, the spokesperson said, these are areas of "active inquiry," and the National Security Council is working with other agencies to address the "unexplained health incidents."

"The health and well-being of American public servants is a paramount priority to the Administration and we take extremely seriously reports by our personnel of anomalous health incidents," the spokesperson said.

Victims of the suspected attacks report symptoms consistent with the "Havana syndrome" incidents of 2016, in which a number of American spies and diplomats experienced residual headaches, loss of balance and hearing, ringing and pressure in the ears, and sometimes long-term brain damage.

2021-06-07 Directed-energy attacks: The invisible threat Congress wants answers on (264711)The GRU's inclusion as a suspect in the investigation, which has not been previously reported, comes as Biden administration officials are working to reassure outraged lawmakers that they are committed to getting to the bottom of the issue and holding those responsible to account. Officials have already sounded the alarm to members of Congress about what they see as an increasing threat of directed-energy attacks on American personnel, POLITICO first reported.

CIA Director William Burns is deepening his involvement in the effort and is now receiving daily briefings on the status of the investigation, according to two people familiar with the matter. Burns has also appointed a senior officer reporting directly to him about those efforts.

The GRU is well-known for its involvement in Russia's covert operations around the world, including Moscow's annexation of Crimea and numerous cyberattacks across the West. The U.S. has already found the GRU to be responsible for interfering in the 2016 and 2018 elections through the use of cyberattacks and other means.

The group has a known footprint in each of the locations where the suspected incidents occurred, including in the U.S., and is the only agency within the Russian government that has the technology to pull off such attacks, the people said.

"It looks, smells and feels like the GRU," said one former national security official involved in the investigation. "When you are looking at the landscape, there are very few people who are willing, capable and have the technology. It's pretty simple forensics."

A current official briefed on the probe said GRU agents “are the only ones [we] know have the capability to attack our people like that on our soil.”

Israel and China may also have the technology, but neither country operates in all of the locations where the incidents were reported, or has shown the desire to attack Americans in this way, another former national security official said.

When reached for comment about Burns’ involvement, a CIA spokesperson referred POLITICO to the director’s comments before the House Intelligence Committee last month, during which he said it would be a “very high priority to ensure that my colleagues get the care that they deserve and that we get to the bottom of what caused these incidents and who was responsible.”

In a statement last month, the bipartisan leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee credited Burns — who has been on the job only since March — with a “renewed focus” on directed-energy attacks.

After initially declining to comment, a spokesperson for Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines issued a statement to POLITICO noting that the intelligence community (IC) has “no definitive information about the cause of these incidents” and has not concluded whether a foreign actor is responsible.

“Since the beginning of the Biden administration, the IC has intensified efforts to identify the cause of these incidents, determine attribution, increase collection efforts, and prevent additional [anomalous health incidents],” said Amanda Schoch, the assistant director of national intelligence for strategic communications.

The Pentagon launched an investigation into the incidents late last year after then-acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller spoke to a combat veteran who suspected he had been attacked and was seeking medical attention, POLITICO previously reported.

Miller told POLITICO last week that the suspected attacks amount to “an act of war.”

The incidents have allegedly occurred all over the world, including in Europe, Miami, northern Virginia and near the White House, POLITICO reported.

Russian study of this type of technology dates back to the latter part of the 20th century, when the former Soviet Union opted to pursue “irregular warfare,” where it could counter the United States in “the seams and the gaps,” rather than in the conventional space, the first former official said. Microwave pulse weapons, which use a form of electromagnetic radiation to damage targets, are “the perfect gray zone” weapons because attribution is so difficult, the person said.

While investigators have not determined definitively that these incidents are caused by a specific weapon, some believe any such device would be primarily transported by vehicle, according to the former official and a congressional official. Some could be small enough to fit into a large backpack, and an individual can be targeted from 500 to 1,000 yards away.

Betsy Woodruff Swan and Erin Banco contributed to this report.

This article has been updated to include comment from ODNI.