Speculation continues about reason for CIA Director's trip to Moscow

U.S. C-17A Globemaster III at Vnukovo airport near Moscow on Tuesday.

Shortly after 10 a.m. on Tuesday, after a flight of a little more than an hour from Riga, Latvia, a U.S. Air Force C-17A Globemaster III arrived at Vnukovo Airport about 15 miles southwest of Moscow. The plane was unmarked except for a very small American flag on the tail. John Ratcliffe, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was on board and was arriving in an unannounced visit for meetings with Russian intelligence and security officials. After meeting with those officials for most of the day, Ratcliffe returned to Riga after 6 p.m. and then continued on to Washington. A senior Ukrainian official said Washington had informed Kyiv an American delegation would be traveling to and returning from Moscow that day and had asked Ukraine to suspend its drone and missile strikes until the delegation left Moscow that evening.

It was not the first time the Director of the CIA has travelled to Russia; President Biden sent then-Director William Burns to Moscow in October 2021 as Russia moved significant numbers of troops and supplies to areas close to Ukraine. Burns met with Russian officials and spoke by phone with President Putin, who was in Sochi, and warned him not to attack Ukraine. The warning obviously had no effect; four months later, Russia launched what Putin in an early morning address on Feb. 24, 2022 called a "special military operation" – one that was in fact nothing less than a full-fledged attack.

After arriving Tuesday, Ratcliffe had a series of meetings with intelligence and security officials, beginning with a meeting with Aleksandr Bortnikov, the director of Russia's Federal Security Services (FSB), which deals with internal security, counterintelligence, and border control, and followed by a meeting with Sergey Naryshkin, the director of

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). (The FSB and SVR are the successors to the two most important components of the old KGB, which was dissolved in 1991.) Bortnikov did not say anything subsequently about his meeting with Ratcliffe, and after his meeting with Ratcliffe, Naryshkin said only, "The meeting took place and there's nothing special about it." He said they had talked about "a range of issues that fall within the scope of our intelligence services."

Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov confirmed Ratcliffe's visit and said the talks were "on the intelligence agencies' level" and that Ratcliffe had not met with Putin but Putin had been informed about the talks. When asked whether the visit might have a positive impact on Russian - American relations, Peskov said it was too soon to tell: "Contacts through intelligence service channels are, in and of themselves, a positive phenomenon, a positive process. All I can tell you is that there have been contacts via the security services. These contacts often continue even during the most difficult periods. Our president, incidentally, has spoken about this. However, it is still too early to say to what extent this will, overall, help to steer our bilateral relations out of the profound crisis in which they currently find themselves."

On Wednesday, President Trump, in an interview with a talk show host, confirmed that he had sent Ratcliffe to Moscow in the hope that talks with Russian officials might contribute to ending the war. He said, "Something may come out of it. We're working very hard to get that war ended." He described Ratcliffe's meetings as "semi-routine' and said they covered "a range of issues that fall within the scope of our intelligence services."

Neither President Trump nor anyone else in the American administration subsequently explained why Ratcliffe flew to Moscow and various commentators have put forward a wide range of possible explanations, none of which have been confirmed or rejected by the administration. One obvious possibility was simply to convey, directly and bluntly, a simple message – that the U.S. and Europe will not let Russia win the war and will continue to support Ukraine, including militarily, if the war continues. Another possibility, perhaps linked to the first, was to convey to Russia a commitment about the advantages – financial and perhaps territorial – that would accompany a decision to end the war. Still another possibility was the perceived need to make it clear to Russia that in the event it attacks, with drones and/or missiles or troops, one or more neighboring states that are NATO members – most notably perhaps, one of the Baltic or East European member states – that could and no doubt would cause the state or states attacked to invoke Article V of the NATO Treaty, which states that an attack on one member is an attack on all members, and that, in that situation, the U.S. would support the state or states that were attacked.

Trump subsequently downplayed the matter, and indeed on Wednesday said, speaking of Ratcliffe, "He's there, you know, very sort of semi-routine." But it wasn't in fact "semi-routine" and it may've have been done to underscore the danger to Russia of

either inadvertently or consciously extending its war against Ukraine to one or more of the Baltic or East European members of NATO, and in so doing extending it to NATO.

David R. Cameron
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