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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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17.02.2024

House Intelligence Committee chair sparks uproar over Russian “space weapons”

The Biden administration confirmed Thursday the statement by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner the previous day, alleging that his committee had been briefed on a new “anti-satellite capability that Russia is developing,” but denied that there was any significant threat to the United States.

While Turner set off a 24-hour furor in Washington with his revelation, accompanied by a demand that the White House declassify and make public certain details of the new space weapon, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said, “This is not an active capability that’s been deployed.

“And though Russia’s pursuit of this particular capability is troubling there was no immediate threat to anyone’s safety,” he added. “We are not talking about a weapon that can be used to attack human beings or cause physical destruction here on Earth.”

In particular, the White House disputed Turner’s suggestion that Russia was deploying a nuclear weapon in outer space, which would be in violation of numerous treaty obligations. Instead, Kirby said, Russia was preparing to deploy an anti-satellite weapon powered by an onboard nuclear reactor.

The US government has launched nuclear-powered satellites into space, but only for longer-term missions to the furthest reaches of the solar system, where solar radiation is too weak to convert into electrical power. Russia has previously launched satellites powered by fission reactors.

Despite media claims that the White House was “furious” over Turner’s revelation, as well as his demand that the administration declassify information on the subject, the letter

which Turner issued was based on bipartisan consultation, and was co-signed by the ranking Democrat on the committee, Jim Hines of Connecticut.

Another Democratic member of the committee, Jason Crow of Colorado, a veteran of special operations forces who fought in Afghanistan, called the supposed Russian satellite one of numerous “volatile threats” facing the United States. “This is something that requires our attention,” he told the *New York Times*. “There’s no doubt. It’s not an immediate crisis, but certainly something that we have to be very serious about.”

Turner announced his committee would brief all members of the House in closed-door sessions on Thursday and Friday. The House Intelligence Committee voted Monday to carry out the briefing about a “destabilizing foreign military capability.”

The letter ignited a firestorm of media coverage, with sensational headlines that appeared aimed at touching off popular panic, modeled on those that accompanied the reports on a Chinese “spy balloon” a year ago—a weather balloon that was shot down by the Pentagon over the Atlantic coast after it traversed Alaska, Canada and the continental US.

Fascistic Republicans in the House Freedom Caucus accused Turner, a supporter of US military aid to Ukraine, with seeking to stampede the House into approving the legislation just passed by the Senate, which provides \$95 billion in supplemental military spending, including \$60 billion for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Florida Republican Matt Gaetz accusing Turner of “gaslighting the country,” while Andy Ogles of Tennessee demanded an investigation of the Intelligence Committee chairman. Former Trump White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, an ex-congressman, echoed these claims, saying, “That’s the only thing that seems to tie up with the facts so far, that Mike Turner wants more money for Ukraine, and he’s decided to do this to scare people into voting for it.”

This was not just right-wing paranoia. The *New York Times*, in its report Thursday, cited unnamed officials who “said Mr. Turner was making more of the new intelligence than would ordinarily have been expected, perhaps to create pressure to prod the House to take up the supplemental funding request for Ukraine that the Senate passed this week.”

It is possible, but unlikely, that Turner and the Biden White House are performing an elaborate maneuver in support of the Ukraine funding bill, but there is little doubt that the administration is desperate to push through the legislation, given the precarious military-political position of the right-wing government in Kiev.

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House Speaker Mike Johnson has blocked consideration of the Ukraine military aid bill because of opposition from far-right Republicans and ex-president Donald Trump, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination.

Making the incident even murkier, Turner made his revelation only hours before White House national security advisor Jake Sullivan was to brief the so-called “Gang of Eight,” the top leaders of both parties in Congress, as well as the intelligence committee chairs and ranking members in both houses, on the supposed threat of Russian satellite-killers in space.

Senate Intelligence Chairman Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat, and Vice Chairman Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, issued a joint statement declaring that their committee had been “rigorously tracking this issue from the start,” but warning about the danger of “disclosing sources and methods that may be key to preserving a range of options for U.S. action.”

Turner’s disclosure came only a few hours before the Pentagon used Elon Musk’s SpaceX company to launch a missile-tracking system into orbit, a prototype for a plan to replace the large, easily targeted communications satellites on which the military currently relies with hundreds of smaller satellites distributed throughout low-Earth orbit, according to defense industry reports.

The furor comes amid intensifying conflict between the White House and the Republican-controlled House, not only over the Ukraine aid bill, but over passage of a budget for Fiscal Year 2024, which is already more than four months old. The House is recessing Friday for two weeks, not returning until February 28, only two days before the expiration of funding for several federal departments, and only two weeks before the expiration of funding for the entire government.

The prospect of another federal shutdown, or an across-the-board cut in spending under the budget deal agreed by Biden and then House Speaker Kevin McCarthy last June, only underscores the mounting political instability in the United States.

World Socialist 16.02.2024