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Senior Army General Says He Is in the Dark About Trump-Putin Summit

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A top commander of U.S. military operations in Syria said he wasn't informed of any agreements President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin reached at their summit this week.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for the Middle East, said Thursday in a briefing with reporters that he had "no new guidance as a result of Helsinki," the site of Monday's summit. Syria was among the topics Messrs. Trump and Putin said they discussed.

On Tuesday, a Russian defense ministry spokesman said the two nations had reached agreements and Russia was ready to discuss "cooperation in Syria."

But U.S. officials across government have said they aren't clear what the two leaders agreed upon. The lack of memorandums on the one-on-one, two-hour meeting has left military planners uncertain what was discussed on topics such as stopping Iranian expansion into Syria, Russia's support for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, and the war against Islamic State.

Gen. Votel, however, stressed that he feels the "mission is very, very clear."

The general's comments marked the first time a senior Defense Department leader talked publicly about the summit. Three Pentagon officials who would be tasked with implementing any military agreement also said in interviews they hadn't been briefed about Mr. Trump's meeting with Mr. Putin.

Typically, the White House would brief national-security officials after a meeting with a foreign leader or provide a written memo.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis was scheduled to meet Thursday with Mr. Trump at the White House.

Some offices in the Pentagon were still waiting for a White House summation of the president's meeting with NATO in Brussels last week, two of the officials said.

President Donald Trump failed to confront Russian President Vladimir Putin on tough issues at a summit in Helsinki on Monday. WSJ's Gerald F. Seib explains. Photo: Getty

Messrs. Trump and Putin said they discussed securing Israel's border with Syria, where Iranian-backed fighters now are based, humanitarian aid and possible cooperation between the U.S. and Russia, even as they are fighting on behalf of opposing sides in the seven-year war. Russian forces back Mr. Assad, while the U.S. has largely supported antigovernment rebels fighting Islamic State.

"Our militaries have gotten along probably better than our political leaders for years," Mr. Trump said Monday in Helsinki. "They do coordinate in Syria and other places."

On Thursday morning, Mr. Trump wrote on Twitter that the summit was a "great success."

"I look forward to our second meeting so that we can start implementing some of the many things discussed, including stopping terrorism, security for Israel, nuclear proliferation, cyberattacks, trade, Ukraine, Middle East peace, North Korea and more," he wrote.

Mr. Trump was accompanied only by a translator in the meeting with Mr. Putin. Without Pentagon, State Department or National Security Council officials in the meeting, only the White House could provide details of the discussion. As he sat down ahead of the Helsinki meeting, Mr. Putin was seen carrying a notepad and pen; Mr. Trump appeared to arrive empty-handed.

Several top U.S. officials joined Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin and their Russian counterparts at a second two-hour meeting later.

On Capitol Hill, legislators have called for Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who was part of the second meeting, and Mr. Trump's translator to testify about the summit.

Mr. Pompeo is scheduled to testify July 25 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; no arrangements have been announced for the translator to testify.

Gen. Votel said that any cooperation between Russia and the U.S. in Syria would require congressional action because the U.S. military isn't legally allowed to work side-by-side with its Russian counterparts. The U.S. and Russian militaries communicate frequently to avoid military missteps in Syria.

Analysts warned that by keeping the Pentagon out of the loop, the White House has made it harder for the military to carry out any agreements the president made with Mr. Putin.

"At the implementation stage, that is where the rubber meets the road," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "The risk is that the president makes certain utterances and then is frustrated by the seeming lack of response by U.S. government officials because they were not consulted before the president issued a new policy."