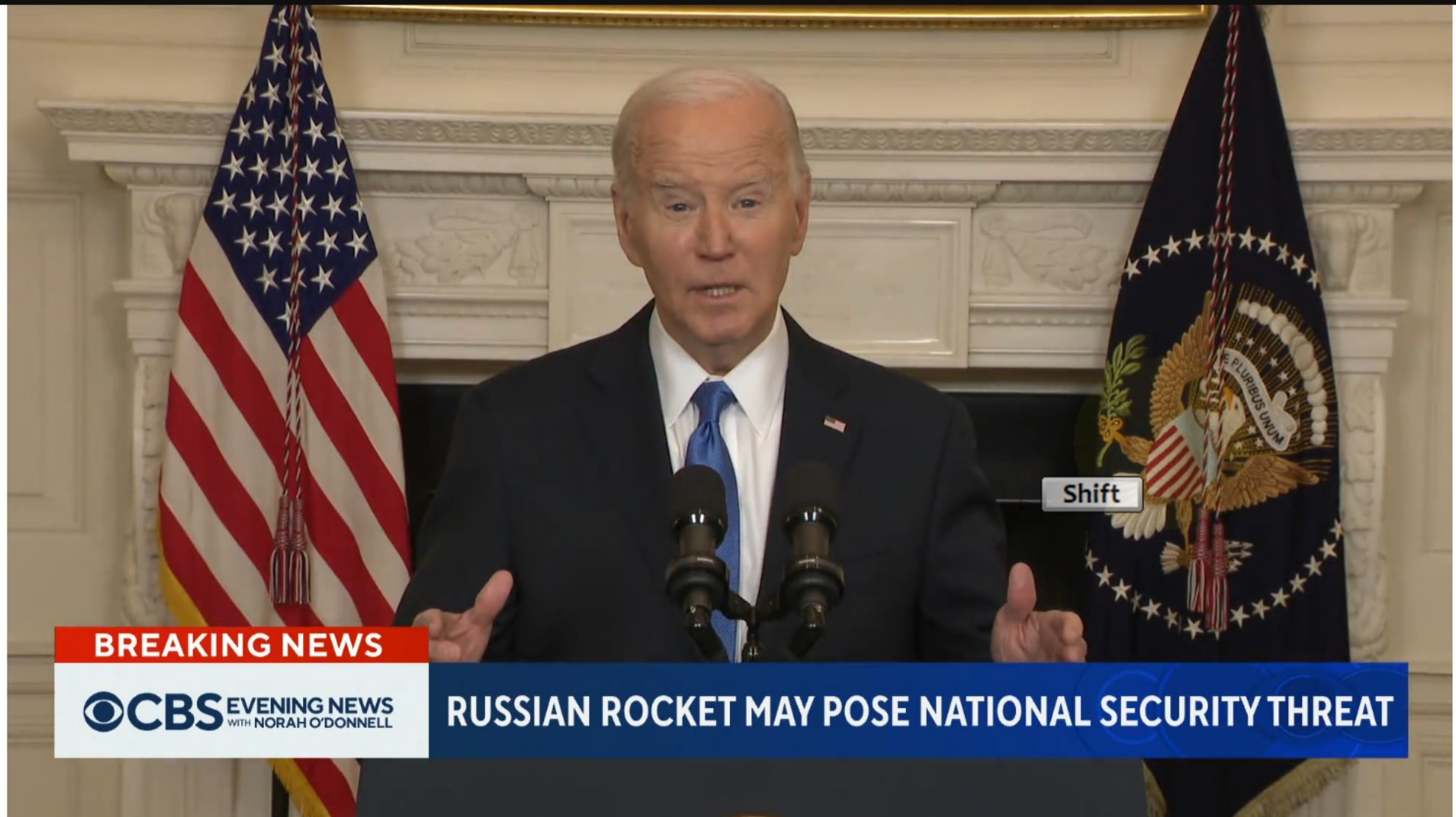


POLITICS >

White House confirms intelligence showing Russia developing "anti-satellite capability"

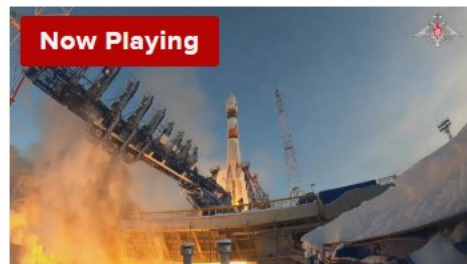
By Caitlin Yilek
February 15, 2024 / 3:17 PM EST / CBS News



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Washington – The White House confirmed Thursday that the U.S. has intelligence that Russia is developing a capability to target satellites in space, one day after the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee gave a cryptic warning about "a serious national security threat."

"It is related to an anti-satellite capability that Russia is developing," John Kirby, a national security spokesman, said at the daily press briefing. "This is not an active capability that's been deployed, and though Russia's pursuit of this particular capability is troubling, there is no immediate threat to anyone's safety."

"We're not talking about a weapon that can be used to attack human beings or cause physical destruction here on Earth," Kirby said, later adding that the threat "would be space-based."

Kirby said the U.S. has been aware of Russia's pursuit of the capability for many months, if not years, "but only in recent weeks now has the intelligence community been able to assess with a higher sense of confidence exactly how Russia continues to pursue it."

Kirby would not give details about whether the capability involved a nuclear-powered weapon or a nuclear-capable weapon.

U.S. officials told CBS News on Wednesday that Russia is developing a nuclear-capable weapon that could take down U.S. satellites, knocking out the ability to communicate, but there is no evidence a weapon has actually been deployed.

Kirby said "any anti-satellite capability should be of general concern" given humanity's reliance on satellites for communication, navigation, weather forecasting and other functions.



John Kirby speaks during the daily press briefing at the White House on Feb. 15, 2024.

ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

"Any capability that could disrupt that, and that could therefore have some impact on services here on Earth and across the world should be of concern to anybody," he said, also noting that it could put astronauts in low orbit at risk.

Russia drew international condemnation in 2021 when it destroyed a Soviet-era satellite with a missile fired from the ground. The test created 1,500 pieces of orbital debris that forced crewmembers on the International Space Station to seek shelter.

On Wednesday, Rep. Mike Turner of Ohio, the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, issued an unusual public statement urging President Biden to declassify all information relating to an unspecified threat, so the U.S. and its allies could openly discuss a response.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan was scheduled to brief House leaders on the threat on Thursday afternoon. Sullivan declined to provide more details but said Wednesday that the Biden administration is "protecting the national security of the United States and the American people."

Turner has been criticized by his colleagues who have accused him of causing unnecessary panic.

After reviewing classified information related to the threat, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee said Wednesday that it was a serious issue, but not one that should cause immediate panic. Rep. Jim Himes of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the committee, said the issue needs to be addressed "in the medium-to-long run."

A member of Turner's own party asked for House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, to investigate whether the statements had any impact on U.S. foreign and domestic policy, suggesting that Turner had an ulterior motive.

"This revelation by the Chairman was done with a reckless disregard of the implications and consequences said information would have on geopolitics, domestic and foreign markets, or the well-being and psyche of the American people," Rep. Andy Ogles, a Tennessee Republican, said in a letter to Johnson.

"In hindsight, it has become clear that the intent was not to ensure the safety of our homeland and the American people, but rather to ensure additional funding for Ukraine and passage of an unreformed Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA)," he wrote.

Ellis Kim, Olivia Gazis and Jaala Brown contributed reporting.