

Country Brief: Russia

Takeaways

Despite what the President thinks, Russia is our enemy, not our friend. Russia's goal is to undermine America and its allies, sow discord and dissension, weaken alliances, and alienate us from our closest partners.

Russia has done this by:

- **Undermining democracies and Western institutions** by interfering in elections (including the 2016 US election), spreading disinformation, and supporting separatist movements;
- **Attempting to influence the Trump campaign** and other conservative political groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA), as well as the finances of Trump organizations;
- **Threatening the United States' allies** by amassing troops and conducting large-scale exercises near their borders and, in some cases, directly invading their territories;
- **Violating longstanding arms control treaties** with the United States; and
- **Contributing to instability in the Middle East**; for example, Russia provided support to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, where a seven-year civil war has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and allowed terrorism to thrive.

The United States imposed a series of sanctions on Russia over the years related to its malicious activities, but further sanctions may be needed—with oversight from Congress—to deter Russia's bad behavior. President Trump cannot be trusted on Russia. During his 2018 summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, President Trump demonstrated he is advancing Russia's interests at every turn, at the expense of America's security. The US Congress must step in and find a way to counter Russian hostility toward the West despite our president's refusal to challenge Putin at every turn. This includes taking steps to protect US membership in the NATO alliance, which President Trump reportedly wants to withdraw from. Additionally, Congress must demand that all investigations, including the one by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, continue to determine how successful Russia interference efforts have been. Further, Congress should push for the United States to remain in negotiations with Russia over arms control violations—not to scrap these treaties that have kept America safe.

Ultimately, the world is safer when Russia and the United States cooperate. When the other immediate issues are addressed, hopefully the two nations can once again work together on areas of mutual interest.

Russia has undertaken wide-ranging efforts to undermine Western democracies.

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has had an increasingly adversarial relationship with Western nations, particularly after the Iraq War. In recent years, this has included interfering with other nations' domestic politics.¹ Putin's aim is to foment public distrust in governing systems, undermine candidates perceived as hostile to Russian interests, and disrupt post-Cold War alliances to expand Russia's power and influence.² A report by Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee documents Russia's vigorous efforts to attack democracies it perceives as a threat, including the United States and many of our most important allies.³

The US Intelligence Community has concluded with high confidence that Russia's campaign to influence the 2016 US presidential election was directly ordered by President Putin. Russia took a series of actions aimed at boosting the candidacy of Donald Trump, who was seen as more likely to serve Russia's interests. This strategy involved exploiting social and traditional media platforms to promote propaganda and spread disinformation. To date, 26 Russian nationals and three companies associated with Russia have been indicted in the United States for illegally using social media or hacking into computer networks to interfere in the 2016 US election.⁴ Their tactics included stealing data, using fraudulent accounts, staging political rallies, and promoting pro-Trump or anti-Clinton messages through political advertisements.⁵ Facebook has said that 126 million people may have been exposed to content about the 2016 US election posted by Russian-linked operatives. Nearly 11.4 million people may have been exposed to Facebook ads paid for by fake accounts associated with Russian-linked operatives.⁶ A July 2018 indictment by Special Counsel Robert Mueller of 12 Russian intelligence officers also details how Russian agents stole and released campaign documents to interfere in the election. This included hacking the computer networks of the Clinton campaign, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Democratic National Committee.⁷ Additionally, Russian intelligence services are believed to have hacked into multiple state and local electoral boards.⁸ Special Counsel Robert Mueller and several congressional committees continue to investigate this election interference.

US national security officials, intelligence experts, and others have documented a history of Russian attacks against US institutions, interests, and values even before the 2016 US presidential election. This has resulted in the theft of billions of dollars and data from US businesses and individuals by actors enabled by the Russian government.⁹ Now, Russia has escalated its use of cyber and information warfare to interfere in US elections. Russia's use of cyber and information warfare to interfere in domestic politics is a significant national security threat to the United States. Russia doesn't want to risk a direct confrontation with the West. Therefore, it uses cyber and information warfare to attack the United States, undermine its institutions, and sow division.

The United States is not the only nation Russia has targeted by interfering in its domestic politics. Russia's interference in the 2016 US election follows a pattern of Russia-led influence campaigns and aggression toward America's allies. This political interference has included meddling in France's 2017 presidential election, independence debates in Catalonia and Scotland, and the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. In each case, Russia-connected actors have spread disinformation, amplified separatist voices, and sowed doubts in voters' minds about their democratic systems.¹⁰

We may never know the full extent of Russia's attempts to erode public confidence in US institutions in 2016, but it is clear Russia is not done. Already, US officials, including former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, have concluded that Russia attempted to interfere in the 2018 US midterm elections by spreading disinformation.¹¹ In October 2018, the Department of Justice charged a Russian national in connection with this attempted interference in the midterm elections.¹²

The ultimate result of Russia's efforts could be a distracted, divided Western alliance that can't effectively stand up to Russian aggression. President Trump advanced Russia's agenda by launching a barrage of attacks against America's closest North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies at the alliance's summit last year—an attack former Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Corker (R-TN) called a “punch [of] our friends in the nose.”¹³

Despite the threat, President Trump has refused to acknowledge that Russia interfered in the election on his behalf.¹⁴ Instead, he held a summit with President Putin last year where he refused to condemn Russia's attacks on the democracies of America and our allies or any of the country's other malicious behavior,¹⁵ including shooting down a civilian airliner over Ukraine¹⁶ and assassinating Russian opponents around the world.¹⁷ The refusal of a sitting president to clearly accept the conclusion of the US Intelligence Community undermines its credibility and authority and is a violation of American values. Moreover, because President Trump's whitewashing of Putin's behavior contradicts bipartisan attitudes toward Russia in Congress, it has given the world the impression that the US government is divided and incoherent on this issue.

Tough and smart policymakers must take the threat of Russian information warfare seriously by investing in cybersecurity, strengthening agencies tasked with ensuring the security of elections, and working more closely with the private sector to identify vulnerabilities that the Russians might exploit. Policymakers must educate the public about Russian disinformation efforts and condemn President Trump's attempts to ignore or downplay them. Congress must also continue to provide resources and push for strengthened assistance, coordination, and information sharing between the Department of Homeland Security and state and local election officials to protect against hacking of election systems. Unfortunately, when congressional Democrats sought additional funding in the last Congress for state election security systems, they were thwarted by Senate Republicans who refused to support these critically needed resources.¹⁸ Congressional Democrats should continue to push for this additional funding in the 116th Congress.

Further, it is critical that we place strong sanctions on Russia and continue to pursue criminal indictments against individuals complicit in this malicious activity. We must send a strong signal to these actors that they cannot operate with impunity. Special Counsel Mueller's investigation must be protected by Congress and continue to move forward without further interruptions or accusations of bias. While the Trump Administration has imposed some sanctions on Russian officials, further action may be necessary to send a strong message to Russia that its behavior will not be tolerated.¹⁹

The United States has imposed several rounds of sanctions on Russia for its harmful behavior, but the Trump Administration has also taken steps to work around these sanctions. The United States has sanctioned Russian actors for the government's interference in the 2016 US election with support of bipartisan legislation in Congress.²⁰ The United States has also sanctioned Russia for a spectrum of other malign activity, including its continued perpetration of human

rights abuses and for corruption.²¹ These sanctions were, in part, championed by Bill Browder, a London-based financier whose lawyer in Russia, Sergei Magnitsky, uncovered millions of dollars in Russian corruption and subsequently died in Russian custody.²²

While these sanctions were placed on Russia through congressional legislation, the Trump Administration has moved to lift some of them. Congress must take action to block these efforts. Recently, the Administration announced it would ease sanctions on a Russian oligarch, Oleg Deripaska, who has close ties both to the Russian government and to Trump's former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, who was convicted of multiple crimes for charges brought by Special Counsel Mueller. Unfortunately, while the House voted in favor of a bill that would block this move, the GOP-controlled Senate did not follow suit.²³ Moving forward, Congress should continue to evaluate approaches to force the Trump Administration to ratchet-up sanctions on Russia or any other hostile actor found interfering in US elections, and block Administration efforts to loosen Russian sanctions, if warranted. These sanctions must demonstrate to Russia that it will face costs for its destabilizing behavior.

If the United States does not take further action, it is very likely that Russia will continue to repeat its strategy to influence future US elections, as national security officials—including members of President Trump's own administration, such as National Security Agency Director Mike Rogers, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, and former CIA Director and now Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—have warned.²⁴

Russia's information warfare has included attempts to influence the Trump campaign, other conservative political groups, and the finances of Trump organizations.

Russia's efforts to undermine America's democratic institutions and sow discord has also involved direct efforts to influence the Trump campaign, the finances of Trump organizations, and other conservative political groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA).²⁵ Investigations must continue into how successful those efforts were.

The investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election has uncovered substantial wrongdoing by Trump campaign officials and a pattern of concealing Russian contacts. The investigation has yielded 37 indictments or guilty pleas and four prison sentences.

The timeline for Special Counsel Muller's investigation is highlighted in the chart on the following page:

Special Counsel Mueller’s Investigation Timeline

October 2017:

Trump campaign foreign policy advisor George Papadopoulos pled guilty to lying to the FBI about his communications with Kremlin-linked individuals. While the Mueller investigation continues, it is clear that the Trump campaign had extensive contacts with Russia during the Kremlin’s attempts to influence the 2016 election.

December 2017:

Trump’s former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn pled guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Flynn was found to have had extensive undisclosed contacts with Russian operatives about the 2016 presidential election.

2017 and 2018:

Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and his aide, Rick Gates, were indicted on multiple counts for a series of crimes related to their work on behalf of a pro-Russian political party in Ukraine. As part of Mueller’s charges, Manafort was accused of committing a number of crimes in collaboration with a former Ukrainian aide who allegedly has close ties to Russian intelligence. Manafort and Gates pled guilty to a number of the charges and a Virginia jury found Manafort guilty on eight additional counts.

January 2019:

Former Trump advisor Roger Stone was indicted and charged with seven counts related to his efforts, at the direction of a senior Trump campaign official, to try to obtain thousands of emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee by Russian intelligence agents to damage the campaign of Hillary Clinton, which were published on the website WikiLeaks.²⁶

The Mueller investigation has also discovered substantial personal business dealings between then-candidate Trump in Russia, which were concealed by Trump associates. During his presidential campaign, Trump claimed that he had no business dealings in Russia. Yet the Mueller investigation has found that negotiations led by the president’s personal attorney, Michael Cohen, for the building of a Trump Tower in Moscow continued well into the presidential campaign, during which then-candidate Trump was calling for the easing of sanctions against Russia. Cohen has pled guilty for lying to Congress about these negotiations to obscure the public’s understanding of the extent of Trump’s ties to the Russian government and his business dealings in Russia well into his president campaign.²⁷ The full scope of the financial influence that Russia has on the Trump organization, as well as the businesses of his son-in-law Jared Kushner, remains a serious question that the House of Representatives and the Special Counsel are investigating. Donald Trump’s son, Donald Trump Jr., stated in 2008 about the Trump organization that “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets.”²⁸ The extent that those financial ties continued throughout Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign and after he became president must continue to be thoroughly investigated.

The American people deserve to know whether Russia’s financial leverage over the president and his family members is influencing their decisions. As Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Adam Schiff (D-CA) noted:

There have long been credible allegations that Russian money was laundered through the Trump Organization. If Russia could show that Trump, his business or his immediate family had benefited from tainted money or broken the law—or if Trump

believed they could—it would mean that Russia could exert pressure on Trump to influence U.S. foreign policy.²⁹

Further, the American people deserve a president who is open and transparent about dealings with Russia, not one who attempts to hide conversations from the record. President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin have reportedly met five times since Trump became president, including during a formal summit meeting in Helsinki, Finland last year and at the Group of 20 (G20) meeting in 2017. Yet no details of what was discussed between Trump and Putin have ever been released to the public; even American officials were left in the dark.³⁰

Russia's interests are not America's interests. Their policy aim is to weaken America; they have been trying to do so through a wide variety of methods. It is no surprise that they would want to influence a presidential campaign and a president. The only question is whether they have succeeded at doing so.

Russia has a history of threatening the United States and its allies militarily.

Russia's military has continued to threaten allies of the United States—it has even gone so far as to seize territory from other countries, which unsettles NATO. After years of focusing on other threats (such as terrorism), Russia's military invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, as well as its threatening military exercises in Eastern Europe, have forced NATO to refocus on its original mission of deterring Russia.³¹ But while Russian military forces threaten the alliance, the country aims to win conflicts and weaken adversaries through economic coercion and information warfare long before battle.

The cornerstone of NATO is its mutual defense commitment. This is vital to US national security interests because if the United States were ever attacked by Russia or another hostile actor, it would be considered an attack on all NATO allies. Thus far, the only time NATO's collective defense obligations have been triggered was to come to America's aid after 9/11.³² Beginning under President Obama and spurred on by Russia's aggressive behavior, NATO members' defense spending has been rising.³³ In 2014, in response to a push by President Obama, NATO countries agreed to try to commit at least 2% of their gross domestic product toward their military. This narrowly defined commitment is not money owed to the United States but is a pledge by NATO members to increase their own defense budgets.³⁴ Since this commitment, NATO allies have spent an additional \$87 billion on defense and collective contributions have risen four years in a row.³⁵

Under President Obama, the United States strengthened NATO by increasing its commitment to its European allies to deter and protect against Russian aggression. In 2016, the United States committed \$3.4 billion to a new European Reassurance Initiative. This involved moving US battalions between Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, adding an entire army brigade toward Europe's defense.³⁶

Despite President Trump's repeated criticisms of NATO, the United States commitment to this alliance has remained unchanged thus far.³⁷ Under bipartisan congressional pressure, the Trump Administration has preserved the European Reassurance Initiative. But President Trump's continuing criticism of NATO and the United States' European allies is a gift to Putin, who seeks to divide and undermine America's allies.³⁸

Advancing Russia's interests, President Trump has now reportedly discussed withdrawing the United States from NATO entirely. This move would be a catastrophic mistake, damaging an over 70-year alliance that serves to protect America's interests and counter the threat of Russia.³⁹ The House of Representatives has approved a bill aimed at preventing the Trump Administration from withdrawing the United States from NATO.⁴⁰ The Senate should now follow suit. Members of Congress must continue to call on the Trump Administration to make America's commitment to mutual defense under the NATO alliance clear—something this Administration has so far refused to do.

Already, Putin is succeeding in dividing the United States and its allies thanks to President Trump. Trump has called for Russia to rejoin the Group of Seven (G7) industrialized nations after the country was removed in 2014 as punishment for its annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine. This call came as President Trump angered key US allies in the G7 when he leveled trade actions against Canada, labeling it a national security threat, and imposed tariffs on European allies.⁴¹ Canada and other G7 allies are not a threat to the US, but Russia is. These actions will only serve to drive a deep wedge between the United States and its allies, giving Putin exactly what he wants.

The United States must continue to rebuild its military presence in Europe to deter Russian aggression while reaffirming its commitment to the NATO alliance. The United States must also continue modernizing its nuclear deterrent, just as Russia is modernizing its own. Finally, the United States must counter Russian influence over NATO members—who are reliant on Russian sources of energy—by encouraging allies to import US and other non-Russian sources of energy.

Despite the challenges in the US-Russia relationship, there are a few key areas where cooperation is necessary.

Nuclear arms control requires cooperation with Russia.

As the two largest nuclear powers on the planet, the United States and Russia must work together to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons. Arms control negotiations and agreements between the United States and Russia have been an area of cooperation, even during the Cold War. With around 7,000 warheads, Russia can annihilate the United States if it were to launch an attack.⁴² Washington must find ways to work with Moscow to reduce the number and threat of nuclear weapons, secure stockpiles of nuclear materials, oppose proliferating states, and prevent the risk of nuclear terrorism.

The United States and Russia have pursued nuclear arms control through bilateral agreements for years, including the New START Treaty, which President Obama signed in 2010.⁴³ This treaty expires in 2021 unless it is extended.⁴⁴ Russia has also provided support for diplomatic agreements aimed at reducing the development of nuclear weapons in countries of concern. For example, although President Trump announced in May 2018 that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, Russia says it will continue to honor the agreement.⁴⁵ In the run-up to that deal, Russia removed 25,000 pounds of enriched uranium from Iran, effectively reducing its stockpile to 300 kilograms—as required under the deal.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, arms control cooperation between the United States and Russia has been weakened by Russia's violation of a key agreement between the two countries and the Trump

Administration's refusal to continue negotiations. The two countries signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, banning an entire group of nuclear missiles that both countries perceived as threats. But in recent years, Russia has blatantly violated this treaty. As a result, the Trump Administration has announced that the United States will suspend implementation of the agreement and withdraw completely in six months.⁴⁷ Instead of working to push Russia to respect the terms of the agreement, the Trump Administration has instead chosen to scrap the agreement in its entirety and eliminate a key source of security for the United States and its NATO allies. Congress should now push for the United States to return to the negotiating table with Russia and should oppose any efforts by the Trump Administration to develop or deploy missiles prohibited by the INF Treaty.⁴⁸

Cooperation with Russia is also required in order to stabilize Syria after years of civil war.

Another area that requires US-Russia cooperation is creating a pathway to stabilizing Syria, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have died over the last eight years.⁴⁹ The United States and Russia have been on opposite sides of the civil war in Syria, with the United States opposing long-time Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Russia supporting him. Russia played a key role in enabling and covering up the Assad regime's attacks on its own people, including through the use of chemical weapons.⁵⁰ The conflict has also created a vacuum that has allowed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups to thrive. Foreign fighters who flocked to join ISIS are now returning home and could present security risks to the United States and our allies.

In September 2015, Russia's military intervened in Syria to ensure the survival of Assad's regime, which was on the verge of collapse. While Russia has targeted ISIS and other terrorist groups in its operations, it has also bombed US-backed rebel groups⁵¹ and humanitarian aid convoys supplying rebel-held and civilian areas. This has resulted in the deaths of thousands of Syrians.⁵²

In December 2018, President Trump announced he would withdraw US troops from Syria, declaring ISIS to be "defeated." Although his Administration has offered no timetable for the withdrawal, American military officials have warned that the threat of ISIS remains and the group may stage a resurgence once US troops are pulled out.⁵³ The Pentagon and the United Nations have estimated ISIS still has 20,000-30,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq alone.⁵⁴ The United States must now work with Russia to prevent a resurgence of ISIS in Syria through counterterrorism and countering violent extremism measures. Ultimately, the way forward is through a diplomatic process to stabilize Syria and lead to a sustainable political settlement that charts out the course for the future of the country. This will require cooperation between the United States and Russia.

Conclusion

The relationship between Russia and the United States is at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Russia must pay a steep price for its attack on the pillars of American democracy. Without a significant response, there is little to indicate that Russia will refrain from trying to influence US elections moving forward. Yet despite Russia's bad behavior, Moscow and Washington's shared security interests regarding nuclear nonproliferation, Syria, and counterterrorism mean bilateral cooperation must continue where possible. President Trump's contradictory approaches to Russia will require Congress to use its independent voice to ensure that the United States does not diminish its commitment to its European allies in exchange for vague promises of better relations with Russia. Instead, the United States must hold the line on Russia's bad behavior while leaving an extended hand for improved ties around areas of mutual concern like nuclear weapons and terrorism.

ENDNOTES

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