



PRIMER: The Russian Threat

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

- Russia is an adversary of the United States working to harm American interests and undermine American power abroad.
- To assist with his war in Ukraine and to achieve Russian grand strategic objectives, Vladimir Putin is partnering with other American adversaries like China, Iran, and North Korea.
- President Trump has made numerous attempts to secure a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine, but Vladimir Putin has continued to reject all attempts at peace, despite Russia only achieving marginal territorial gains at significant human cost to both Ukraine and Russia.
- As [polling](#) from The Vandenberg Coalition and others clearly shows, Trump voters see Russia as a threat to the United States and support taking tough action to counter Russia.

RUSSIA IS AN ADVERSARY

Russia is an adversary of the United States and a key part of a wider [anti-American bloc](#) that includes China, Iran, and North Korea. While historically Russia and China have been rivals, they have a shared interest today in weakening the United States. Just days prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping infamously agreed to a "[no limits partnership](#)" between their respective nations, which they later reaffirmed in 2025. As part of this [coordination](#), Russia and China routinely support each other in international organizations to undermine the United States, conduct joint air and naval exercises, and work together to circumvent Western sanctions.

In addition to China, Russia has deepened its cooperation with other members of the anti-American bloc. Iran has been [supplying](#) Russia with Shahed drones and other ammunition for Russia's war in Ukraine, and the two jointly evade oil and energy sanctions using "[ghost fleets](#)." North Korea has [deployed](#) its own troops to fight alongside Russia against Ukraine, while Russia has provided economic relief to North Korea, including reportedly providing North Korea with [one million](#) barrels of oil in 2024. Russia was also a close ally to Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and supplied Venezuela with air defense systems, though these systems ultimately proved incapable of stopping American military forces in Operation Absolute Resolve.

According to [polling](#) conducted by The Vandenberg Coalition, Trump voters clearly see Russia as a threat to the United States and support taking tough action to counter Moscow. In [January 2026](#), 85 percent of Trump voters labeled Russia a threat to U.S. national security, 92 percent expressed concern about increased cooperation between American adversaries in Ukraine, and three-quarters support strengthening sanctions against Russia for Putin's refusal to pursue peace negotiations in good faith.

RUSSIA IN UKRAINE

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a clear example of the threat Russia poses to American interests and partners. Putin's explicit goal in Ukraine was to decapitate Ukraine's government and install a pro-Russian, anti-Western regime that would be hostile to American interests in the region. [Russia's assault](#) — a multi-pronged effort that has included kinetic military operations, missile and drone attacks

targeting Ukrainian civilians, and cyberattacks against power grids and essential services — has killed over one million people while achieving only marginal territorial gains. Russia is continuing to fund its war effort through oil and natural gas sales and receives material support from China, Iran, and North Korea.

Allowing Putin to achieve a decisive victory in Ukraine would increase the risk that he would be emboldened to attack other Eastern European countries, including NATO member states. Putin has already been testing NATO's resolve, including by Russian drone incursions into NATO airspace in September 2025. NATO remains an important and strategic security alliance for the United States, and notably, President Trump has successfully pushed NATO countries to spend more on defense. European countries must continue to increase their direct financial and military support for Ukraine.

While the Trump administration has worked hard to broker an end to the fighting, Russia has rejected all of President Trump's efforts. [Polling](#) shows that Trump voters consistently have identified Putin as the biggest impediment to ending the conflict. The United States must continue ramping up pressure on Putin, including through enforcing sanctions on Russian oil and targeting Russia's "ghost fleet," to force Putin to begin taking peace talks seriously.

RUSSIA'S TECH THREAT

Russia has conducted extensive [cyber and information warfare operations](#) against the United States, utilizing hybrid warfare strategies developed during the Soviet era. Russian offensive cyber operations have [penetrated](#) U.S. critical infrastructure and infected multiple government systems. The NotPetya malware attack in 2017, which originated in Ukraine but spread to U.S. hospitals, companies, and pharmaceutical manufacturers, caused billions of dollars in damages. Similarly, the 2020 SolarWinds hack, attributed to a Russian government-backed group, compromised systems across numerous U.S. local, state, and federal agencies and private companies. Additionally, while more investigations are necessary, [recent reporting](#) suggests Russia may have been the origin of the 2016 Havana Syndrome attacks, implicating Putin's regime in the harming of dozens of American diplomats.

Along with China, Russia also [weaponizes](#) social media to disseminate propaganda and sow and exacerbate divisions within the American political discourse. Problematically, the Russian information warfare threat has also been [politicized](#), including the false allegations of Russian collusion in 2016 against then-candidate Donald Trump and the false assertion in 2020 that Hunter Biden's laptop was Russian disinformation that were used as justification for domestic censorship and partisan attacks. These kinds of distortions contribute to Russia's objectives by creating discord and mistrust, and it is critical to ensure this Russian threat is viewed objectively. As the Trump administration [noted](#) in a February 2026 report to Congress, Russia aggressively utilizes information warfare to undermine and harm the United States, and it must be robustly combatted.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Target Russia's "ghost fleet" and sources of illicit revenue:** Russia depends on its energy sales to sustain its war against Ukraine. However, American sanctions and tariffs work; Russian oil exports to India and Turkey have [decreased](#) in the face of heightened U.S. and European sanctions, making Russia more reliant on sending oil to China to [extract](#) revenue. It is critical to continue expanding secondary sanctions against countries doing business with Russia and seizing Russia's "ghost fleet" responsible for exporting sanctioned Russian oil.



- **Partner with Europe to counter Russia:** Both President Trump’s National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy acknowledge that Europe and NATO are critical allies with whom we must have a strong partnership and remain engaged to counter the threat from Russia. To ensure the NATO alliance remains strong into the 21st century, we must continue pushing members to contribute their fair share, including following through on pledges for higher defense spending. We also must work collaboratively to prevent Russia from dominating key regions like the Arctic. Additionally, given that Putin has continued to signal that he is not interested in peace, the United States should continue selling military equipment both to Ukraine and to our European allies, who should also be providing Ukraine with weapons and financial support.
- **Invest in cybersecurity protections for the U.S. homeland:** Russia’s cyber capabilities pose a direct threat to the American homeland. Federal, state, and local governments need to invest in cybersecurity and critical infrastructure upgrades to protect against Russian cyberattacks and prevent Russian actors from gaining access to the personnel records of government workers and other U.S. citizens.

