

FACT SHEET

How Serious Is the Threat Posed by Russian President Vladimir Putin to the U.S., NATO, and Their Western Allies?

What the Experts Are Saying

Compiled by Joel C. Rosenberg
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What U.S. Military Leaders Say about the Putin Threat

General Joe Dunford, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee: [July 2015](#) and [September 2017](#))

- Russia “could pose an existential threat to the United States.” (2015)
- Moscow’s behavior is “nothing short of alarming.” (2015)
- “Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security.” (2017)
- “Russia does present the greatest array of military challenges and remains the only potential existential threat to the United States. They continue to invest in a full range of capabilities designed to limit our ability to project power into Europe and meet our alliance commitments to NATO. These capabilities include long-range conventional strike, cyber, space, electronic warfare, ground force, and undersea capabilities. Russia is also modernizing all elements of its nuclear triad. These modernization efforts must also be viewed in the context of their activities in the Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria. Russia’s operations, capability development, and asymmetric doctrinal and strategic approaches are designed to . . . undermine the credibility of the NATO alliance.” (2017)
- “What currently makes Russia a more formidable threat is its nuclear capability, cyber capabilities, propensity to demonstrate aggressive behavior, and its willingness to employ military force. While North Korea, Iran, and ISIS pose regional as well as global threats, and clearly demonstrate malign influence, none of these pose an existential threat to our nation. Russia and China are in a different category. They . . . are capable of engaging the U.S. across the full spectrum of nuclear and conventional conflict.” (2017)
- “[T]he most significant threat in cyberspace we face today, the most advanced capabilities are the Russians.” (2017)

General Mark Milley, U.S. Army Chief of Staff ([Remarks at Defense One Summit, November 2015](#))

- “Russia is the only country on earth that has the capability to destroy the United States of America.
- “It’s an existential threat by definition because of their nuclear capabilities. Other countries have nuclear weapons, but none as many as Russia, and none have the capability to literally destroy the United States.”

- “The situation with Russia in my mind is serious and growing more serious. I see Russia as aggressive, not just assertive. They attacked Georgia; they illegally seized Crimea; they have attacked Ukraine—all those countries were free and independent and have been sovereign nations now for a quarter century, since the fall of the Berlin Wall. I would say Russia’s recent behavior is adversarial to the interests of the United States.”
- “So, we want on the one hand to maintain strength in order to deter further Russian aggression and we need to stand firm where that aggression manifests itself, hence things like sanctions and what NATO is doing right now. On the flip side, you don’t want to shut them off completely, so we have our hands outreached where you have common interests and there are a variety of areas where the U.S., NATO, and other friends to the U.S. have common interests with Russia, so it’s not a zero and one calculation; there’s more nuance than that.”

James Mattis, U.S. Secretary of Defense

- “I would consider the principal threats [to U.S. national security] to start with Russia. We recognize that he (Putin) is trying to break the North Atlantic alliance. I think it [the world order] is under the biggest attack since World War II, and that is from Russia, from terrorist groups, and with what China is doing in the South China Sea.” ([Testimony](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee, January 2017)
- “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.” ([Summary of the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), January 2018)
- “Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor. The use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, but when coupled with its expanding and modernizing nuclear arsenal, the challenge is clear.” ([Summary of the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), January 2018)

What NATO Military Leaders Say about the Putin Threat

U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe, 2009 to 2013 (excerpts from the foreword to *War With Russia*, Quercus Books, 2016)

- “As the Strategic Commander of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, I saw Russian aggression firsthand. Of all the challenges America faces on the geopolitical scene in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the most dangerous is the resurgence of Russia under President Putin. Yes, Islamic jihadists pose a massive threat to our security, but until the jihadists can defeat

us on the battlefield, they cannot destroy our nation. The Russians are different—and this is the truly terrifying bit—as they appear to be prepared to use nuclear weapons, based on recent, very public comments by Vladimir Putin.”

- “Under President Putin, Russia has charted a dangerous course that, if allowed to continue, may lead inexorably to a clash with NATO. And that will mean a war that could easily go nuclear. . . . But this dynamic can be stopped and war averted if NATO, under the leadership of America, shows the necessary resolve and determination. It is a war that can be prevented, but only if the Russians believe we are serious about being prepared to fight to defend our freedoms and those of our allies.”

U.K. Army General Sir Richard Shirreff, NATO’s Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, 2011 to 2014 (excerpts from the preface to *War With Russia*, Quercus Books, 2016)

- “This is the story of how the West failed to heed the warning signals from Russia, unwittingly emboldened its president, and through a succession of disastrous policy decisions, blundered over the precipice to war.”
- “‘So what?’ you may say. Of course it will be grim for the people of the Baltic States and Poland, ‘faraway countries of which we know little’—to paraphrase the UK’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1938 when shying away from facing up to Nazi aggression towards those countries. But will it really affect us in the US and Western Europe if NATO is rendered impotent and we are unable to protect the Baltics States and Poland from Russia? The answer to that is a resounding, ‘Yes.’ First, the most terrifying scenario is that, without strong conventional deterrence—tanks, planes, artillery, ships, and boots on the ground—the only remaining line of defense for a NATO facing imminent military defeat is nuclear weapons.”
- “The growing weakness of the West’s conventional forces means that the only way Russia can be deterred or defeated is by the threat or use of nuclear weapons. However, the consequence of the release of intercontinental ballistic missiles on Russia would be Armageddon; a result so terrible that the Russian president will calculate that the U.S., U.K., and France—the only nuclear-armed states in NATO—would never risk the near-total destruction of human civilization in the U.S. and Europe for the sake of three Baltic states. And he is probably right. Which is why he would get away with it.”
- “It does not need Russian soldiers marching through Berlin and Paris for the world as we know it to cease to exist. A militarily victorious Russia, able to dictate to a defeated Europe and NATO from the end of a barrel as to exactly what will and will not be acceptable to them, will be enough for life as we now know it in the West to come to a very abrupt end. NATO will collapse and transatlantic—and therefore American—security will be threatened. The [Russian] president will have achieved his aim of destroying NATO, the alliance of free, democratic countries he sees as standing between him and a return to Russian great power status. . . . Of one thing I am absolutely certain: the president in the Kremlin knows all this, and even as you read these words, his admirals and generals are

also war-gaming these very scenarios. And they have every intention of winning the war.”

What U.S. Intelligence Officials Say about the Putin Threat

Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence (excerpts from the [Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 2018](#))

- “In his probable next term in office, President Vladimir Putin will rely on assertive and opportunistic foreign policies to shape outcomes beyond Russia’s borders. He will also resort to more authoritarian tactics to maintain control amid challenges to his rule.”
- “We expect that Russia will conduct bolder and more disruptive cyber operations during the next year, most likely using new capabilities against Ukraine. The Russian government is likely to build on the wide range of operations it is already conducting, including disruption of Ukrainian energy distribution networks, hack-and-leak influence operations, distributed denial-of-service attacks, and false flag operations. In the next year, Russian intelligence and security services will continue to probe US and allied critical infrastructures, as well as target the United States, NATO, and allies for insights into US policy.”
- “Russia has developed a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) that the United States has declared is in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Despite Russia’s ongoing development of other Treaty-compliant missiles with intermediate ranges, Moscow probably believes that the new GLCM provides sufficient military advantages to make it worth risking the political repercussions of violating the INF Treaty. In 2013, a senior Russian administration official stated publicly that the world had changed since the INF Treaty was signed in 1987.”
- “We assess that the Russian intelligence services will continue their efforts to disseminate false information via Russian state-controlled media and covert online personas about US activities to encourage anti-US political views. Moscow seeks to create wedges that reduce trust and confidence in democratic processes, degrade democratization efforts, weaken US partnerships with European allies, undermine Western sanctions, encourage anti-US political views, and counter efforts to bring Ukraine and other former Soviet states into European institutions.”

Mike Pompeo, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

- Asked if he expects Russia to attempt to disrupt, subvert and/or undermine the 2018 U.S. elections, Pompeo said, “Of course. I have every expectation that they will continue to try to do that, but I’m confident that America will be able to have free and fair elections [and] that we will push back in a way that is sufficiently robust that the impact they will have on our elections won’t be great.” ([interview](#) with the BBC, February 2018)
- Asked about Russian efforts to disrupt, subvert and undermine the 2016 elections, Pompeo said, “With respect to this report in particular, it’s pretty clear about what took place here, about Russian involvement in efforts to hack

information and to have an impact on American democracy. This was an aggressive action taken by senior leadership inside of Russia.” ([testimony](#) to the Senate Intelligence Committee, January 2017. For more on this topic, see [report](#) from the U.S. Director of National Intelligence on the intel community’s unified assessment of Russian efforts to disrupt the 2016 elections.)

What Civilian Experts Say about the Putin Threat

Garry Kasparov, [Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped](#) (PublicAffairs Books, October 2015)

- “[E]ven though Putin is now a clear and present danger, Europe and America are still getting it wrong. The democracies of the world must unite and relearn the lessons of how the Cold War was won before we slide completely into another one.”
- “Putin’s Russia is clearly the biggest and most dangerous threat facing the world today.”
- “A war on any grounds is terrible, but Putin’s dangerous turn to ethnically-based imperialism cannot be ignored. Those who say the Ukraine conflict is far away and unlikely to lead to global instability miss the clear warning Putin has given us. There is no reason to believe his announced vision of a ‘Greater Russia’ will not end with eastern Ukraine and many reasons to believe it will not.”
- “Dictators are only stopped when they are stopped, and appeasing Putin with Ukraine will only stoke his appetite for more conquests.”
- About the author: “Garry Kasparov spent twenty years as the world’s number one ranked chess player. In 2005, he retired from professional chess to lead the pro-democracy opposition against Vladimir Putin, from street protests to coalition building. In 2012, he was named chairman of the Human Rights Foundation, succeeding Václav Havel. He has been a contributing editor to the *Wall Street Journal* since 1991 and he is a senior visiting fellow at the Oxford Martin School. He lives in self-imposed exile in New York with his wife, Dasha, and their children.”

Bill Browder, [Red Notice: A True Story of High Finance, Murder, and One Man’s Fight for Justice](#) (Simon & Schuster, February 2015)

- “When Putin came to power in 2000, instead of dismantling this machine of lying and fabrication, he modified it and made it all the more powerful.”
- “This is Russia today. A stuffy room presided over by a corrupt judge, policed by unthinking guards, with lawyers who are just there to give the appearance of a real trial, and with no defendant in the cage. A place where lies reign supreme. A place where two and two is still five, white is still black, and up is still down. A place where convictions are certain and guilt a given. Where a foreigner can be convicted in absentia of crimes he did not commit.”
- “I have to assume that there is a very real chance that Putin or members of his regime will have me killed one day. Like anyone else, I have no death wish and I have no intention of letting them kill me. I can’t mention most of the countermeasures I take, but I will mention one: this book. If I’m killed, you will

know who did it. When my enemies read this book, they will know that you know. So if you sympathize with this search for justice, or with Sergei [Magnitsky's] tragic fate, please share this story with as many people as you can. That simple act will keep the spirit of Sergei Magnitsky alive and go further than an army of bodyguards in keeping me safe."

- About the author: "Bill Browder, founder and CEO of Hermitage Capital Management, was the largest foreign investor in Russia until 2005. Since 2009, when his lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, was murdered in prison after uncovering a \$230 million fraud committed by Russian government officials, Browder has been leading a campaign to expose Russia's endemic corruption and human rights abuses."

Leon Aron, Director of Russian Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, "[Vladimir Putin's Wartime Presidency](#)" (essay for AEI, February 2018)

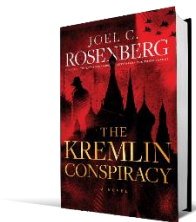
- "[B]y the end of his [next] term Putin will have been in power as president or de facto leader for 24 years—longer than any Russian ruler since Nicholas I (1825-1855) except for Stalin."
- "Don't waste your time on campaign speeches to discern Putin's direction. Instead, look at Russia's \$324 billion State Armament [Program](#) for 2018–27, authorized in November 2017 by Putin after a non-stop, four-day session in Sochi with the heads of key defense-sector enterprises and with Russia's top military brass. This program follows the 2012–2020 one and, adjusted for inflation, costs about as much."
- "Such a call for wartime mobilization, unheard of since the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, is especially jarring in a country which already [spends a third of its budget on defense](#), and whose economy is [barely emerging from recession, with stagnation](#) (at best) as far as the eye can see."
- "For years now, Duma deputies, government officials, and top national TV hosts have implied, with varying explicitness, that Russia is in a de facto war, with the West in general and the United States very much in particular. And during wartime, one has to sacrifice for the 'defense of the motherland!'"
- "All of which amounts to Putin's positioning himself as a wartime president. Protecting Russia from relentlessly plotting enemies (and in the process, restoring it to the lost glory of the Soviet Union) is by far the weightiest component of his popularity—and of his regime's legitimacy."
- "The tiger of patriotic mobilization needs to be fed—and the larger and bloodier the meat, the better. As the head of Russia's last remaining independent polling agency, the Levada Center, Lev Gudkov [puts it](#), Putin's Russia is a 'toxic state, a dangerous state, which preserves its legitimacy by provoking conflicts, by the threat of war[so as to] mobilize the population in support of the regime. This is an extremely dangerous development.' But the Syrian conflict is distant, and after almost four years, the proxy war on Ukraine cannot be easily sold as a defense of Russia and ethnic Russians from NATO-supported 'neo-Nazis.'"
- "Should Putin perceive the regime's support eroding precipitously, poking at NATO's eastern flank—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—could do the trick. To be sure, such an endeavor would be very risky—but so is embarking on a de facto

nineteenth year in power, for another six years and beyond in a 21st-century European country where economic and social realities are growing increasingly disjointed from people's expectations.”

- “The West had better get ready for Vladimir Putin’s wartime presidency: volatile, risk-prone, increasingly basing domestic legitimacy on brinksmanship with NATO, and lasting a very, very long time.”

Ariel Cohen, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, [“Russia Is Roaring Back to the Middle East while America Is Asleep”](#) (article for *National Interest*, November 2017)

- “Russia is back in the Middle East. The Kremlin is methodically creating a systematic geopolitical challenge to the interests of the United States and its allies.”
- “As in Soviet times, Moscow seeks to control governments, re-establish military bases, open maritime routes, and expand exports. These great power ambitions suggest a broader shift in the regional balance, revealing a return to the nineteenth-century strategic competition and raising serious questions about the future of American power.”
- “Russia has defined itself as an ever-expanding empire since time immemorial.”
- “The United States’ shale revolution coincides with American war fatigue and diminishing international involvement. President Donald J. Trump [has denounced](#) global democracy and nation-building ideological crusades, and apparently seeks Putin’s partnership. However, the Washington establishment (including the Republican Congressional leadership) disagree, viewing Russia as an implacable global adversary.”
- “Whether America’s disengagement will end, we do not know. History teaches us that the United States is a global power and will be dragged into major future power competitions, including with Russia, China, and Iran. But without articulating coherent, credible policy goals; without improving its key relations, [it may lose](#) post-Cold War U.S. regional predominance positions, including in the Middle East. Supporting the Saudis in Yemen, cooperating with Iraq against ISIS, and a new Israeli-Palestinian [“peace plan”](#) do not yet amount to a coherent regional strategy.”
- “This lack of coherence will complicate support for U.S. allies in the Gulf and Israel, and will further undermine relations with key Arab ally Egypt. Ultimately, America’s global standing will suffer, as Russia with its languishing economy, which is only one-fourteenth of America’s, prevails over the U.S. superpower in a key global geostrategic theater.”



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