

# Diplomatic Relations with Russia: Overview

## Introduction

On April 18, 2019, amid startling revelations of Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, a *Wall Street Journal* article with the headline “Putin Has Won” concluded “unambiguously” that “Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election and sought to help Donald Trump win the White House.” “Putin has won” was the report sent home by a Russian operative in New York upon hearing that Trump had won the election. The subsequent investigation carried out by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, the result of which were released in a heavily redacted report in April 2019, did not find evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. However, it did find that a foreign government with a history of adversarial relations with the United States had hacked into e-mail servers, released waves of negative messaging on social media, made repeated contacts with business leaders that controlled election finances, and could have made a difference in the ultimate outcome of the election.

The extent of Russian involvement in the 2016 election (which Russia has staunchly denied) shocked many Americans, but some see a pattern of increasingly aggressive behavior on the part of Russian president Vladimir Putin, the center of political power in Russia since his first presidency in 2000. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the political and economic turmoil that followed, Putin’s message of resurgent Russian power and his willingness to openly challenge the United States galvanized support for his regime. Russia has been increasingly at odds with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a Western multinational mutual defense organization that Russia sees as an antagonist, since it invited Russia’s neighbors Georgia and Ukraine to join the alliance in 2008. Increasingly suspicious of the United States and resentful of what he saw as interference in the political landscape of the former Soviet Union, Putin’s government has taken an unapologetically aggressive posture in international relations, including annexing the Crimean peninsula (part of Ukraine), openly testing weapons in violation of treaties, bombing US allies in Syria, and authorizing the assassination of opposition leaders and journalists.

The question of how to respond to Putin’s aggressive stance has burdened American leaders from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump, and the debate continues. Some dismiss the aggression as bravado and political posturing, arguing that sanctions and threats will only escalate the situation and the only workable solution is continuing diplomacy. Others see Putin as the dangerously aggressive leader of a nuclear state who is actively working

against the interests of the United States and the European Union and must be shown that aggression will be met with stiff resistance. It is a debate that is as old as Russia itself.

## Understanding the Discussion

**Crimea:** A peninsula comprising approximately 10,400 square miles of land in Eastern Europe, part of Ukraine since 1954. It was annexed by Russia in 2014.

**Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty:** A nuclear weapon control treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union, signed by United States President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.

**Mueller Report:** The official report into Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, from an investigation led by special counsel Robert Mueller.

**North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):** A twenty-nine-member military alliance of North American and European countries founded in 1949.



Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in Helsinki, July 16, 2018.  
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**Vladimir Putin:** A Russian politician and former KGB officer who has been the preeminent leader of Russia since 2000, serving two terms as president from 2000 to 2008, and then again since 2012. Between 2008 and 2012, he held the position of prime minister of Russia.

## History

The adversarial relationship between Russia and the United States is deeply rooted in the long and complex history of the Cold War period. The Soviet Union, a Communist country formed in 1922 with Russia as its dominant member, was a vital ally of the United States during World War II, despite conflicting ideologies and simmering tensions. After the war, however, the Soviet Union consolidated its control over Eastern Europe and parts of Germany, and the United States and its allies responded by blocking Soviet expansion and forming the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. The Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb that same year. The Korean War (1950–53) was the first of many international conflicts, including the Vietnam War, that served as proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union, with each side determined to halt the spread of the ideology of their other. There was never direct military conflict between the US and the Soviet Union, but in the early 1960s, with the building of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two nuclear superpowers came so close to open conflict that in 1963, the two countries agreed to establish direct lines of communication between the two governments that could be used in a crisis.

Despite continuing hostilities, including the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, the next two decades were marked by continuous negotiations, treaties, and diplomatic maneuvering. Notable diplomatic achievements included the July 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, an agreement to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons signed by the United States, the Soviet Union, and sixty other nations; the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; and the 1972 and 1979 Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and II). The election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985 marked a period of reform in Russia, marked by Gorbachev's principals of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring). Gorbachev and US president Ronald Reagan sent televised holiday greetings to each other, removed some restrictions on travel and trade, and signed the landmark 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Beginning in 1989, communist governments across eastern Europe began to fall. Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would not interfere with the internal affairs of the Eastern European countries that were ousting their communist governments. The Berlin Wall, which separated communist East Berlin from West Berlin and symbolized the Cold War division of Germany, came down in November of that year. It was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. By December 25, 1991, all but one of the Soviet republics had left the union and announced that they would establish the Commonwealth of Independent States; the breakaway province of Chechnya unilaterally declared independence; and Gorbachev resigned.

Boris Yeltsin, president of Russia beginning in June 1991, led Russia through the chaotic period that followed the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Though the world celebrated the end of the Cold War and its nuclear threats, and Russia embraced

democratic and free-market reforms, the change was messy, painful, and complicated. Unleashed from the repressive regimes of the past, autocrats, corruption, and criminality flourished. The economy foundered as businesses privatized and created wealthy oligarchs at the expense of the people of Russia. Political unrest, crime, corruption, and poverty sparked resentment of what was seen as interference by the United States and the Western powers and the vastly diminished role of Russia on the world stage, and a degree of nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

In 1999, Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned the presidency, naming Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a former KGB official, as the interim president. Putin went on to win the March 2000 election, at forty-seven becoming the youngest Russian leader since Joseph Stalin. From the beginning of his presidency, it was clear that Putin was deeply invested in returning Russia to its place as a major international power, and would use nostalgia for the power of the Soviet era to build support. In 2000, he reinstated the Soviet national anthem, with new words, and took a hard line with President Bill Clinton at a summit in Moscow, refusing to come to an agreement on a national missile defense system. In 2001, in an ongoing feud with new US president George W. Bush, Putin and the White House expelled members of each other's diplomatic corps, a power play used frequently by Putin since then. Putin began consolidating power at home, reining in the Russian media, and closing the last independent Russian television station in 2003. New laws forbade the media to comment on elections, prompting protests nationwide. After winning decisive reelection in 2004, Putin abolished the election of regional governors in favor of political appointments, and openly mourned the loss of the Soviet Union as a "major geopolitical disaster" in a 2005 state of the nation address. In 2006, Putin boasted that Russia's missiles could penetrate any defense system in the world.

In 2008, Putin, who was no longer eligible to run for president because of term limits in Russia, was appointed prime minister and continued to be the *de facto* Russian leader. During this time, he began an often antagonistic relationship with US president Barack Obama, sparked in part by George W. Bush's promise in 2008 to Ukraine and Georgia that they would one day join NATO. In 2011, he accused the United States of interfering in parliamentary elections and encouraging antigovernment protests. Putin won a third presidential term in 2012, amid widespread complaints of election fraud. In response to US sanctions prompted by allegations of human rights violations, Putin ended the widespread adoption of Russian children by Americans. In 2014, Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine, incurring condemnation and sanctions from Western nations, including the United States.

## Diplomatic Relations with Russia Today

In 2015, Putin came into sharp conflict with the United States over the civil war in Syria, with Russia supplying Syrian government forces with aid and bombing antigovernment forces supported by the United States, while claiming to target ISIS terrorist groups. The United States and the European Union

extended sanctions that had begun as a result of the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and added more Russian corporations and banks to the list, further antagonizing Putin and the Russian oligarchs. In 2016, hints began to emerge in the US press that Putin was working covertly to help elect Donald Trump in the US presidential election. Though he staunchly denied this, Putin publicly praised Trump for “getting through to voters’ hearts.” In September 2016, Russia’s covert activities to disrupt the election and damage Democratic political groups, including the Democratic National Committee and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, were revealed to Congress, leading to the December 29, 2016, order that expelled thirty-five Russian diplomats from the United States and expanded sanctions still further against Russia. The full extent of Russian interference in the 2016 election was revealed with the publication of the Mueller Report in 2019.

Despite what seems to be a cordial relationship with President Trump, Putin’s aggressive posturing has continued in the years following Trump’s election. In 2017, Putin announced that he would expel 755 members of the United States diplomatic service in Russia because of new and renewed sanctions, and in 2018, new sanctions were imposed after the Russian government was implicated in the attempted murder of former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in England. In 2018, the United States announced that it would withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. NATO reported that “Russia has developed and fielded a missile system, the 9M729, which violates the INF Treaty and poses significant risks to Euro-Atlantic security.”

In May 2019, the United States also accused Russia of interfering in the political crisis in Venezuela after Russian military personnel arrived in support of embattled Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro. The United States has offered support to Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó after a contested election.

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