



Academic Paper

Trump and the Dilemma of Transforming US-Russian Relations



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Trump and the Dilemma of Transforming US-Russian Relations

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

The US-Ukraine summit in Washington at the end of February 2025 marked a shift in the US approach to Russia, its historical rival. President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance publicly criticized Ukraine’s policies towards Russia, sparking widespread reactions from leaders within the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The US Democratic Party also condemned Trump’s stance, with several prominent leaders speaking out. Furthermore, some members of the Republican Party, as well as influential American intellectuals, expressed criticism of his position.



Criticism of Trump’s policy in this regard focused on two key aspects: First, the violation of diplomatic traditions by conducting dialogue and negotiations in public, and the disregard for established diplomatic protocols. Concerns were raised over his choice of vocabulary, body language and the direct accusations leveled at the Ukrainian president. These actions caused confusion and led to the postponement of a crucial agreement between the two parties regarding Ukraine’s rare mineral resources. As a result, a press conference that was scheduled to follow the meeting was canceled.

Second, concerns over the substance of Trump’s new approach, which involved deepening a rift within the Western alliance against Russia, particularly regarding its policies toward Ukraine and other international issues, such as imposing tariffs on allied countries like the EU and Canada. Additionally, critics expressed worry about the cohesion of NATO and its evolving direction, as well as the deepening division within the US over its stance toward Russia, Canada and other allies.²

Interpreting Trump’s Policy Towards Russia

“Turning points” in a country’s policy often confuse political analysts, especially when the shift lacks clear structural precursors, particularly in major countries. The US-Russian relationship (and previously the Soviet one) was defined by its most significant mega-trend: periods of peaceful competition, followed by disputes using soft tools of mutual pressure, and at times, conflict involving generally harsher methods. Excluding the unique circumstances of World War II and the brief period of relative rapprochement during the



Mikhail Gorbachev-Boris Yeltsin era before the Soviet Union's collapse, the rivalry between the US and Russia has remained a central feature of contemporary international relations.

However, President Trump's tenure from early 2017 to the end of 2020 led to a reduction in the intensity of the rivalry between the US and Russia, a trend that was further reinforced by his return to the presidency in early 2025. Throughout this period, Trump consistently expressed admiration for Russian President Putin's personality. Meetings between US and Russian officials were held in Saudi Arabia, notably without European or Ukrainian participation. Trump also worked to reintegrate Russia into the G7 and emphasized fostering economic cooperation with the country.³

Three main hypotheses have dominated contemporary international relations literature in explaining the shift in US relations with Russia:

First Hypothesis: A Return to the Westphalian Model to Address the Burdens of Globalization

Most scholars of US affairs find it difficult to ideologically categorize US President Trump. However, many associate him with the so-called “alt-right” or paleoconservatism, a blend of conservative paternalism, nationalism, Christian ethics, and regionalism—key elements of the “traditional right.” This movement is predominantly rooted in the Republican Party. In terms of foreign policy, it prioritizes trade protectionism, opposes globalization, advocates for limited military intervention, and emphasizes the primacy of national interests.⁴



Donald Trump

Despite the growing interconnection of international interests through communication, transportation, trade, multinational corporations and other forces of globalization, the “nation-state,” with its Westphalian perspective, continues to exert significant influence in international affairs. It seems that Trump, along with a significant portion of American society and its Republican elite, aligns with the Westphalian movement, whose roots can be traced back to the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan popularized the slogan “Make America Great Again.” This slogan laid the groundwork for the political movement Trump and his supporters would later launch—the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement—in 2012. Trump then revived this movement during his 2015–2016 presidential campaign, bringing it into the national spotlight once again.⁵ The MAGA movement was founded on the belief that the US, once a “superpower,” has lost its status for three main reasons:



- 1. Immigration and multiculturalism have significantly influenced American identity, sometimes challenging integration as subcultures shape distinct communities. Beyond cultural shifts, immigration also presents economic burdens. The number of unauthorized immigrants in the US grew from 3.5 million in 1990 to approximately 11 million by the end of 2022, while the lawful immigrant population reached 36.9 million in the same year.⁶
- 2. The mechanisms of globalization have also contributed, with Trump articulating its impact by stating, “Globalization has made the financial elites who donate to politicians very wealthy, but it’s left millions and millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache—and our towns and cities with empty factories and plants,” adding, “We’re fighting for Main Street, not Wall Street. We have rejected globalism and embraced patriotism.”⁷ Therefore, MAGA has embraced a political vision centered on the “America First” approach, prioritizing the nation’s interests and advocating for a substantial reduction in immigration, particularly from developing countries. It supports the promotion and enforcement of traditional American values from a patriotic standpoint. Trump’s 2015 call for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” exemplifies this stance.⁸
- 3. The foreign dimension of the “nation-state” orientation has gained prominence, with a growing trend toward Westphalianism in American literature. Patrick Buchanan’s book is perhaps the first to address this shift in detail, particularly in relation to Russia. This shift is reflected in the strategy of disengaging from commitments that burden the US economy and emphasizing a transition from imperialism to nationalism or patriotism.⁹ This tendency is evident in Trump’s refusal to consistently support international institutions he views as mechanisms of globalization, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Paris Climate Agreement, etc. His strong tariff policies further highlight his skepticism toward multilateral institutions—those in which countries collaborate to address global issues and establish international frameworks. Known for his “America First” and “Make America Great Again” policies, Trump’s approach is rooted in a distrust of multilateralism.¹⁰ This is further reflected in the shift in US policy from leading the Western coalition to counter Russian influence in Europe to aligning with Russia on issues that oppose other Western positions, as seen in the case of Ukraine. Proponents of this hypothesis argue that US aid to Ukraine significantly surpasses European contributions, as claimed by Trump, “We’ve spent more than \$300bn and Europe has spent about \$100bn - that’s a big difference.” However, European research sources have questioned these figures, with some even suggesting



that European aid exceeds that of the US. It is important to note, though, that US aid was primarily in the form of grants, whereas most European assistance was in the form of loans,¹¹ making the US financial burden greater than Europe's.

The realization of this hypothesis is evident as new US approaches to Russia have emerged, such as refraining from holding Russia responsible for the war in Ukraine. Instead, blame has been placed on the political direction taken by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, a stance evident in the clash at the White House in late February. This shift also marked a US retreat from continuing to bear the burden of supporting Ukraine.



**Volodymyr
Zelensky**

Trump's position is further reinforced by the fact that 54% of Republicans have a favorable view of Ukraine, compared to 84% of Democrats. Moreover, the majority of Republican lawmakers back his approach, further solidifying his stance.¹²

Some argue that a rapprochement with Moscow, albeit at a lower level, began during the Obama administration under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. However, this shift was disrupted by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as a confrontation between Ukrainian President Zelensky and the then US President Biden.¹³ As a result, Trump's stance on Russia is not necessarily one of favoring the country, but rather an expression of US national interests. This is supported by the fact that the first Trump administration imposed 52 punitive policies on Russia across political, economic, military, and security domains, including 8 in 2017, 30 in 2018, and 14 in 2019.¹⁴

Some, particularly within Russian circles, believe that Trump's policy toward Ukraine is aimed at increasing Europe's future dependence on the US, particularly in response to US pressures in key areas such as security and economics.¹⁵

In short, this hypothesis posits that Trump's policy toward Russia embodies a conservative approach, aiming to avoid major and costly military confrontations. It seeks to secure greater concessions from Europe in favor of the US, prioritizing US national interests above all other international considerations. Additionally, his strategy aims to adapt international trade and institutions to benefit the US, with a focus on strengthening the US state rather than expanding the US empire.

Second Hypothesis: Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories have long been a subject of extensive debate among researchers and political groups. Michael Barkun¹⁶ defines a conspiracy as a "covert plots, planned and/or carried out by two or more persons" to alter a specific reality. This plot can focus



on a particular event, such as an assassination, involve structural changes to a political, social, or economic system, or be based on a metaphysical belief that hidden forces are driving change. One of the most prominent forms of political conspiracy involves intelligence work, particularly the recruitment of individuals to carry out significant missions in foreign countries.

When examining conspiracy theorists' views on the shift in US-Russia relations under Trump, two main approaches emerge:

- ▶ 1. one considers Trump an asset to Russia.
- ▶ 2. The other regards him as an agent of Russia.



A prominent figure in this discussion makes a distinction between the two terms. An “asset” is someone whose “influence and status” in one country are exploited by another to achieve specific goals. On the other hand, an “agent” is a person who knowingly provides sensitive or confidential information or adopts certain positions at the request of another party, often in exchange for specific benefits.¹⁷

The available data on Trump's relationship with Russia overlap to such an extent that distinguishing between his role as an asset and that of an agent becomes challenging. Some studies and reports suggest, as we will explain, a connection between Trump and Russian security services, which can be classified as “individual” according to Barkun's previous classifications. This implies that Trump has had long-standing involvement with Russian intelligence and that the Russians may have recruited him using a combination of several factors:¹⁸

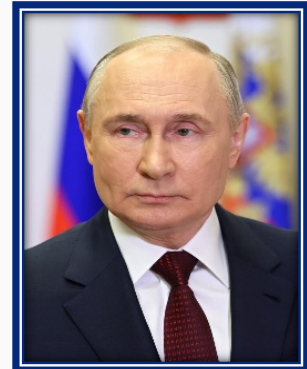
- ▶ 1. His personality, as analyzed in a report by 37 American psychologists, exhibits several distinct traits, the most notable being:
 - Possessing eight of the nine traits of narcissism.
 - Paranoia.
 - A high tendency to lie.
 - A disregard for values and morals, viewing life solely through the lens of “deals.”
- ▶ 2. Leveraging his and his associates' financial ties with the Russians to advance political objectives.
- ▶ 3. The multiple legal cases filed against him during his first term and beyond, along with his unique status as the only US president impeached twice over matters related to the presidential elections and Russia's involvement, heighten the risk of him becoming entangled in the Soviet trap and leaving behind a legacy that benefits Russia.



The conspiracy theory in the case of Trump can be identified according to the following sequence, in which we will demonstrate each step:¹⁹

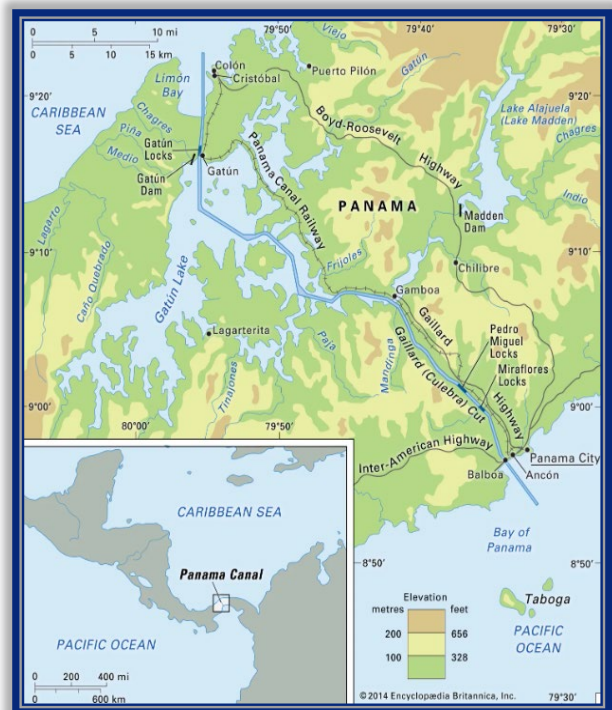
- ▶ 1. During Trump's financial struggles, Russian actors stepped in to support him.
- ▶ 2. Many of those involved had ties to the "Russian mafia."
- ▶ 3. These mafias exploited Trump's projects as a channel for "money laundering."
- ▶ 4. A significant number of Russian mafiosi are connected to key Russian entities, particularly President Putin and the Russian intelligence services.

Given the strong overlap between the issue's security and commercial dimensions, as well as its key players—countries, individuals, and companies—we will outline the facts supporting the conspiracy or collusion hypothesis. Proponents argue that this relationship involves two countries: Russia, led by President Putin, a former KGB officer whose long experience in intelligence shapes his strategic approach,²⁰ and the US, led by a president driven by financial interests and excessive narcissism, making him a prime intelligence target. This dynamic, they suggest, is why Hillary Clinton described Trump as Putin's "puppet."²¹



Vladimir Putin

Proponents of this hypothesis, based on the sources and reports referenced above, argue that Trump's approach to global relations—particularly with US allies—is inconsistent with his administration's stance toward Russia. This divergence has contributed to a sharp rift in US-European relations, with significant effects on NATO. Trump's actions, such as his attempts to acquire Greenland from Denmark, seize the Panama Canal and annex Canada, reflect his unorthodox foreign policy. Moreover, his threats to Middle Eastern allies, implying that they must eventually accept his plan to displace the population of the Gaza Strip, further illustrate his controversial approach. In addition, his stance toward China is one of total confrontation, highlighting the inconsistency between his attitudes toward Russia and other global powers. As a result, Trump's positions have prompted leaders of key European countries, such as Britain, France and



Germany, to denounce his policies, especially when contrasted with his friendly stance toward Russia. He has even sought to pull his allies into negotiations with Russia over Ukraine, a move that seems to suggest his underlying call for European acquiescence to Russia's influence. This was illustrated when the US halted military aid to Ukraine, and the White House reportedly instructed the State Department and Treasury Department to compile lists of Russian entities and individuals— including oligarchs—whose sanctions could potentially be lifted. Furthermore, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has directed the US Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) to halt all planning against Russia, including offensive cyber operations,²² despite USCYBERCOM's role in providing information about Trump's relationship with Russia, as we will explain.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, Trump's legal battles, which have followed him since his political rise, are notable. The most prominent of these are the prosecutions related to allegations of "suspicious links with Russia" and Russia's role in his first success in the US elections. This issue has become a focal point, explored in numerous references, books and press reports.

Based on the sources we have cited for the conspiracy theorists, we cite the following evidence:

► 1. Trump and the KGB

In his 352-page book *American Kompromat*,²³ published in 2021, author Craig Unger²⁴ reveals crucial details about Donald Trump's ties to Russia and his associations with the notorious businessman Jeffrey Epstein, who was described as a sex trafficker responsible for bringing women to Trump.²⁵ The book features the claims of Yuri Shvets, a former KGB major, who operated inside the US in the 1980s, using a cover position as a Washington-based correspondent for TASS, the Russian news agency.²⁶ In 1993, he moved permanently to the US, where he gained US citizenship. He works as a corporate security investigator and was a partner of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer who had fled to Britain and was assassinated in London in 2006.²⁷



In Unger's book, Shvets asserts that Donald Trump "was cultivated as a Russian asset over 40 years," drawing a parallel to "the British spy ring that passed secrets to Moscow during the second world war and early cold war."²⁸

Reports suggest that Donald Trump's connection to Russia began in 1977, through his relationship with Ivana Zelníčková, a Czech model whose father had ties to the Czech secret service (StB) during the Soviet era. Ivana later became Trump's first wife and the mother of his three children. At that time, Trump became the target of a spying operation



overseen by Czechoslovakia's intelligence service in cooperation with the KGB. What raises suspicions about Trump's ties to Russia is the rapid pace of his rise to wealth within just three years, marked by the launch of his first major real estate project—the Grand Hyatt New York Hotel near Grand Central Station.²⁹ Furthermore, reports from the 1990s indicate that Ivana was questioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) regarding her connections to StB.³⁰



Many studies of Trump's relationship with Russia suggest that his first contact with Russian officials occurred during an event in Trump Tower in 1986 by then-Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations Yuri Dubinin.³¹ However, Unger's book, based on Shvets's testimony, argues that the connection actually began six years earlier, when Trump purchased 200 television sets from Semyon Kislin, a Soviet émigré who co-owned Joy-Lud Electronics, a company controlled by the KGB. According to Shvets, Kislin was, in fact, a KGB agent.³²

The deepening of Trump's relationship with Russia began in 1987 when he and his Czech wife visited Moscow and St. Petersburg. During this time, Russian intelligence shifted its focus to Trump, seeking to plant the idea of "considering a career in politics." They carefully studied his personality and identified three key weaknesses that made him susceptible to recruitment: cognitive impairment, psychological problems, and the need of constant praise (These traits align with the findings of American psychological and social science experts, who have analyzed Trump's psychological state, as discussed earlier in the report).³³ The KGB's primary strategy was to fuel Trump's megalomania by promoting the idea that only leaders like him were fit to rule the world—a notion that fed perfectly into his pathological narcissism. Motivated by this, he deepened his ties with the Republican Party, held rallies, and launched campaign advertisements in major American newspapers, particularly *The New York Times*. His ads questioned the value of NATO and the US alliance with Japan, aligning with Russian interests. Communication with Russia continued until the 2016 election, which Trump won, ultimately fulfilling Russia's strategic objective.³⁴

After Trump's victory, which Russia quickly welcomed, a wave of direct and implicit accusations emerged about a potentially suspicious relationship between Russia and Trump. The Center for American Progress



Action Fund, through its Moscow Project initiative,³⁵ reported that the Trump campaign had extensive interactions with Russian officials—an estimated 272 contacts, including 38 meetings with Russian-linked operatives. The Fund's reports highlight several key indicators, including the following:³⁶



- a. During Trump’s period of significant debt across various investment projects, Russia offered financial support through members of its oligarchic class. These individuals, closely connected to both the Kremlin and the real estate market—Trump’s favored sector—acted as the primary channel for this assistance.
- b. Allowing Trump’s associates to engage with Russian state-owned or mixed-sector companies (those with both public and private ownership), and to communicate with Russian ambassadors in Washington or even Putin himself.
- c. Trump has long seen Putin “as a compatriot, a strong and ‘very savvy’ player whose effort to bully Ukraine into making territorial concessions was nothing short of ‘genius.’” “Putin, in his eyes, is someone worthy of admiration and respect, unlike the leaders of traditional U.S. allies like Germany, Canada or France, for whom he exhibits scorn.”³⁷

The American Progress Action Fund report highlights 12 ways in which Trump has supported Putin’s foreign policy agenda: Weaken and divide the transatlantic alliance; Degrade the European Union and foster pro-Russian political movements; Disrupt American leadership and dominance of the global economic order, thru tariffs and economic sanctions; Build global resentment and distrust towards the US and stoke anti-American sentiment; Relieve economic and domestic political pressure from US sanctions on Russia; Trump repeatedly praises and defends Putin, lending the credibility of the US presidency to Putin’s standing; Revive Russia’s status as a great power and gain international recognition for its illegal seizure of Crimea; Continue to sow discord in Western democracies and avoid repercussions for interfering in American and European elections; Trump is shifting the Republican Party’s generations-long hawkish views on Russia; Destabilize the US from within; Advance the Kremlin’s narrative to shape global perceptions; and undermine international norms and democratic values abroad, where Trump has repeatedly failed to respond to human rights violations or support democracy abroad.³⁸

► 2. Russian Interference in US Elections

Former FBI Director Robert S. Mueller’s March 2019 report, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*, is a 448-page, two-volume document³⁹ and the most significant reference on Russian interference in US elections. The first volume presents the factual findings of the Special Counsel’s investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential election and its interactions with the Trump campaign. It is structured into five sections: the first defines the scope of the investigation, the second and third examine Russia’s active measures of election interference, the fourth explores



**Robert S.
Mueller**



potential links between Russian government officials and Trump campaign officials, and the fifth summarizes Special Counsel Robert Mueller's prosecutions and declination decisions.

The second volume of the report examines President Trump's conduct concerning the FBI and the special counsel's investigation, as well as the factors that influenced the inquiry into the allegations.

The report highlights the prominent status of the plaintiffs against Trump, who are influential figures in both society and the state. In June 2016, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and its Cyber Response Team publicly announced that Russian hackers had compromised its computer network. Releases of hacked materials—hacks that public reporting soon attributed to the Russian government—began that same month.

Additional releases followed in July through the organization WikiLeaks, with further releases in October and November. In late July 2016, soon after WikiLeaks's first release of stolen documents, a foreign government contacted the FBI about a May 2016 encounter with Trump Campaign foreign policy advisor George Papadopoulos. Papadopoulos had suggested to a representative of that foreign government that the Trump Campaign had received indications from the Russian government that it could assist the Campaign through the anonymous release of information damaging to Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. That information prompted the FBI on 31/7/2016, to open an investigation into whether individuals associated with the Trump Campaign were coordinating with the Russian



**George
Papadopoulos**

government in its interference activities. That fall, two federal agencies jointly announced that the Russian government “directed recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including US political organizations,” and, “[t]hese thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the US election process.” After the election, in late December 2016, the United States imposed sanctions on Russia for having interfered in the election. By early 2017, several congressional committees were examining Russia's interference in the election. In May 2017, the executive branch decided to impose sanctions on Russia in response to its interference in the election.⁴⁰

The report, published online, contains numerous pages with redacted content, suggesting the presence of sensitive and classified information. Nonetheless, it highlights 140 meetings and communications between the Trump team, particularly Jared Kushner and others, Russian nationals and WikiLeaks, or their intermediaries. Interestingly, the report distinguishes between treating the subject matter as a conspiracy

rather than collusion, based on the distinction in US federal law.⁴¹ Thus, the investigation concluded that it “did not establish that the contacts described in Volume I, Section IV, *supra*, amounted to an agreement to commit any substantive violation of federal criminal law—including foreign-influence and campaign-finance laws... The Office therefore did not charge any individual associated with the Trump Campaign with conspiracy to commit a federal offense arising from Russia contacts.” However, the report states, “Based on the facts and the applicable legal standards, however, we are unable to reach that judgment. The evidence we obtained about the President’s actions and intent presents difficult issues that prevent us from conclusively determining that no criminal conduct occurred. Accordingly, while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him,” though many U.S. jurists argue that a conspiracy was indeed at play.⁴²

In August 2019, an official of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), filed a complaint with the inspector general of the US intelligence community, Michael Atkinson, alleging that in a July 25 phone call with the newly elected president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, Trump had attempted to extort a promise from Zelensky to interfere in the 2020 US presidential election on Trump’s behalf. Specifically, according to the complaint, Trump strongly implied that some \$400 million in congressionally mandated security assistance to Ukraine would not be provided unless Zelensky carried out two requests, which Trump introduced by saying, “I would like you to do us a favor though....” The first request was that Zelensky search for a computer server used by the Democratic National Committee that supposedly had been hidden in Ukraine after the Internet security firm CrowdStrike determined in 2016 that it had been broken into by hackers based in Russia. According to the CrowdStrike conspiracy theory, which originated as a disinformation campaign by Russia, the missing server contained evidence that the hackers were in fact Ukrainian and that Democrats and CrowdStrike had conspired to falsely blame Russia for interfering in the 2016 presidential election.⁴³ Consequently, and due to Michael Atkinson’s role in investigating Russian interference, Trump decided to fire him, stating, “it is vital that I have the fullest confidence in the appointees serving as Inspectors General. That is no longer the case with regard to this Inspector General.”⁴⁴



Subsequently, WikiLeaks released a trove of emails that later investigations determined had been stolen by Russian hackers from the account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman.⁴⁵ On the same day, the US intelligence community publicly announced its assessment that the Russian government had orchestrated hacking efforts to steal and disseminate sensitive Democratic Party emails and other information, aiming to bolster



John Podesta



the Trump campaign and undermine public confidence in US democratic institutions, including the news media. In response, Trump criticized the competence and motives of US intelligence agencies, insisting that no one could be certain who was behind the hacking. Furthermore, a classified CIA report submitted to Congress in December and published in January 2017 concluded that Russia interfered in the US election by extracting and disseminating Democratic Party emails and conducting a large-scale public influence campaign. Fake social media accounts were used to spread disinformation and sow discord among Americans.⁴⁶

On the other hand, Trump's personality traits—previously discussed—resonated with a segment of his pragmatic society, a fact not overlooked by experts in rival nations eager to exploit it. According to various sources, Russian President Putin recognized an opportunity in Trump, especially given his background as a seasoned intelligence officer, who for years had gathered intelligence across Europe, with a particular focus on NATO. As Michael Morell, former deputy director of the CIA, wrote in the *New York Times* in 2016, “In the intelligence business, we would say that Mr. Putin had recruited Mr. Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation,” adding, “President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia was a career intelligence officer, trained to identify vulnerabilities in an individual and to exploit them. That is exactly what he did early in the primaries. Mr. Putin played upon Mr. Trump's vulnerabilities by complimenting him. He responded just as Mr. Putin had calculated.”⁴⁷ In 1985, the KGB “distributed a secret personality questionnaire, advising case officers what to look for in a successful recruitment operation. In April 1985 this was updated for ‘prominent figures in the West.’ The directorate's aim was to draw the target ‘into some form of collaboration with us.’ This could be ‘as an agent, or confidential or special or unofficial contact.’”⁴⁸

It is clear, based on various sources,⁴⁹ that this was not an individual effort by Putin but rather an organized network led by the Soviet (later Russian) KGB, with each party playing its role. This is evident from an article in the Ukrainian daily *Kyiv*, which wrote about Alnur Mussayev, a former member of the KGB's 6th Department in Moscow. Mussayev explained, “The most important area of work of the 6th Department was the acquisition of spies and sources of information from among businessmen of capitalist countries. It was in that year that our Department recruited the 40-year-old businessman from the USA, Donald Trump, nicknamed ‘Krasnov.’” Other narratives reinforce these accounts. As for Mussayev, “following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Mussayev transitioned into the intelligence framework of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, where he became Chairman of the National Security Committee (KNB). He held this role during two separate terms (1997–1998 and 1999–2001) under President Nursultan Nazarbayev.” Mussayev stated, “Donald



**Nursultan
Nazarbayev**

Trump is on the FSB's hook and is swallowing the bait deeper and deeper. This is evidenced by numerous indirect facts published in the media. There is such a thing as the recruitability of an object...Trump belongs to the category of ideally recruitable people. I have no doubt that Russia has kompromat on the US President.”⁵⁰

In 2017, Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence officer and one of the founders of Orbis Business Intelligence, published a dossier alleging that while Donald Trump was in Moscow, he was filmed in sexually explicit situations with Russian women and photographed in compromising positions. The report suggested that Trump was being blackmailed with this issue, which also included claims of financial and commercial seduction. Additionally, in January 2017, as Trump took office, a declassified intelligence report from the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency (NSA) revealed that Putin had “ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency.” However, Steele's testimony to two FBI agents, given as part of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into an alleged conspiracy between the 2016 Trump campaign and Russia, failed to produce the desired results. In 2019, Mueller concluded that there was no evidence of a criminal conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russia. However, oversight within the US government was further weakened by Trump's unprecedented reshuffling of prosecutors, raising concerns about accountability.⁵¹

Some US officials have repeatedly expressed concerns about the close and ambiguous relationship between Trump and Putin, particularly during Trump's first term. Anthony Scaramucci, who briefly served as Trump's White House Director of Communications in 2017, recently discussed these concerns on *The Rest Is Politics US* podcast, referring to them as a conspiracy. He noted that many of Trump's former top officials were baffled by his admiration for Putin and suggested there was a vague “control” over the president,” though he did not elaborate. Figures like H.R. McMaster, James Mattis and John Kelly also struggled to understand Trump's rapprochement with Putin. Scaramucci admitted he had no explanation for it, adding that neither McMaster, Mattis, nor Kelly could figure it out. However, Mussayev confirmed that Putin had assigned the Trump follow-up file to one of his closest confidants, though he does not disclose the name.⁵²



**Anthony
Scaramucci**

Considering additional sources that support the idea of a relationship between Trump and Russia—such as the Christopher Steele dossier, press reports from outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in 2017, various FBI reports, congressional committee findings, and statements from Trump supporters or businessmen with ties to



him—it becomes clear why some researchers are drawn to the conspiracy theory.⁵³ Unger himself points out, former CIA director Michael Morell has called Trump an “unwitting agent” of the Russians; former national security director James Clapper has described him “in effect ... an intelligence asset”; and former CIA director John Brennan has said Trump is “wholly in the pocket of Putin.” So Shvets’ accusation isn’t really very surprising.⁵⁴

► 3. Trump’s Connections to Financial and Business Circles in Russia

Sources highlight concerns about the connections of the Roman Catholic Opus Dei organization⁵⁵ to key figures in the Trump administration, some of whom have ties to the Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell corruption scandals. The organization's influence is seen as particularly problematic given that many candidates for Trump’s administration are Catholics, including leaders of the emergent Catholic right. Vice President J.D. Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, has aligned himself with the policies of conservative Catholics with fascist tendencies. At the same time, political operatives within this movement have sought to harness traditional fervor over church reforms to expand their influence and build a broader coalition around conservative policies.⁵⁶ One notable aspect of this dynamic is the evolving relationship between this predominantly secretive organization and both Russia, and the Trump team—an issue Democratic candidate Kamala Harris warned about during the last election campaign.⁵⁷



Kamala Harris

According to Western reports, Trump is not acting alone in his dealings with Russia. Several influential American figures connected to Trump are said to have ties to Russia, including individuals involved in laundering money for Russian mafias. These connections can be categorized into three forms:⁵⁸

- Direct ties to Putin or through the Russian ambassador in Washington.
- Links to individuals with interests in Russian state-owned companies and banks.
- Associations with figures tied to Russia’s private sector but within Putin’s sphere of influence.

The financial ties between Trump, his staff and Russia can be explored through the following examples:⁵⁹

- a. Donald Trump: He has traveled to Russia extensively, done business there often, and has ties to Russian interests. For example, in 2008 he made a real estate sale to Russian billionaire, Dmitry Rybolovlev. Trump bought a Palm Beach mansion in 2004 during

a bankruptcy sale for \$41 million, and less than four years later, without ever having moved in, Trump sold the mansion to Rybolovlev for \$95 million (i.e., he earned about \$54 million from this deal). In a May 2017 meeting in the Oval Office, he revealed highly classified information to the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. US media was banned from this meeting, but a Russian photographer was allowed in the session, later releasing these photos on the Russian state-owned news.

- ▶ b. Michael Flynn: Flynn, President Trump's former National Security Advisor, was asked to resign just weeks after he was sworn in. His resignation came after it leaked that he misled Vice President Mike Pence about his communications with Russian officials, specifically Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak, before President Trump's inauguration. In these communications, Flynn discussed sanctions imposed by the Obama administration on Russia – while President Obama was still in office. Earlier he stated that the US needs to respect that “Russia has its own national security strategy, and we have to try to figure out: How do we combine the United States’ national security strategy along with Russia's national security strategy,” raising troubling questions. In 2015, Flynn delivered remarks at a Moscow gala honoring RT, Russia's propaganda arm, where he was seated next to Putin. Flynn accepted \$33,750 for this speech by RT, and did not correctly report the payment, thus concealing payment from a foreign government, and possibly violating the law in the meantime. Flynn continued to appear on RT as a foreign policy analyst. Altogether, Flynn was paid more than \$67 thousand by Russian companies before the 2016 presidential election.
- ▶ c. Jeff Sessions: Sessions, President Trump's Attorney General, had two conversations with Ambassador Kislyak during the 2016 presidential election. However, during later confirmation hearings, he claimed that he “did not have communications with the Russians” when prompted by Senator Al Franken. Once reports of his meetings with Kislyak surfaced, Sessions recused himself from any investigation into Russia's interference in our 2016 presidential election. Many officials are continuing to call for his resignation.
- ▶ d. Rex Tillerson: Tillerson, President Trump's former Secretary of State, worked on energy projects in Russia for two decades during his career at Exxon. He has publicly described his “very close relationship” with President Putin and was awarded Russia's Order of Friendship in 2013, the highest state honor possible for a foreigner.
- ▶ e. Rex Tillerson: Tillerson, President Trump's former Secretary of State, worked on energy projects in Russia for two decades during his career at Exxon. He has publicly



described his “very close relationship” with President Putin and was awarded Russia's Order of Friendship in 2013, the highest state honor possible for a foreigner.

- ▶ f. Jared Kushner’s connection with Sergey Gorkov, the head of Russia's state-owned development bank, is yet another example of these questionable associations.
- ▶ g. Donald Trump, Jr.’s association with a Russian billionaire, Emin Agalarov, under the premise that Emin had “official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary and her dealings with Russia,” during the presidential race against his father.
- ▶ h. Paul Manafort: Trump’s campaign manager. Reports surfaced suggesting he had received \$12.7 million from Victor Yanukovych, Ukraine's pro-Russia former president. He also had ties to Konstantin Kilimnik, a known proxy of Russian intelligence. Additionally, Manafort was linked to business deals with a “Russian aluminum magnate” closely associated to Putin. He was later indicted by a federal grand jury for conspiracy against the US, among other charges.
- ▶ i. Carter Page: hired as a foreign policy advisor to Trump’s 2016 campaign, was known to have deep ties to Gazprom, Russia’s state-owned gas company.
- ▶ j. Tevfik Arif: Arif, who founded Bayrock, a real estate group known for its numerous deals with Trump, had a long career in the Soviet Ministry of Commerce and Trade.
- ▶ k. Wilbur Ross: Ross, President Trump’s Secretary of Commerce, was the top shareholder in the Bank of Cyprus, an institution with deep Russian ties.

Remarkably, in February 2017, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) refused a request from the White House to dismiss rumors of Russian ties to Trump’s associates.⁶⁰ This highlights Trump's direct interference in the judiciary and investigations, seeking to obstruct proceedings related to his suspected ties to Russia.⁶¹ Former CIA Chief John Brennan has confirmed this multiple times, particularly given that he was one of those dismissed by Trump following his critical remarks.⁶²

Third Hypothesis: Undermining China

Trump’s political rhetoric and actions reflect a strong inclination to counter China. According to this hypothesis, his alignment with Russia is strategically intended to undermine China. This tendency is evident in several key developments:⁶³

- ▶ 1. Trump’s approach reflects a strategic shift, increasing the presence of US troops brought back from abroad while redirecting pressure from Russia to China.⁶⁴ This strategy echoes the Nixon-Kissinger rapprochement with China in the 1970s, which aimed to counterbalance the Soviet Union. By easing tensions with Russia, particularly in Ukraine and other regions, Trump appears to believe that the US will be better positioned to manage its next geopolitical challenge with China.



- 2. Russian-Chinese relations have experienced significant growth from 2000 to the present, with trade between the two countries nearly doubling during the 2020–2024 Democratic administration. Some argue that Trump seeks to influence this development by preventing the strengthening of the Russian–Chinese relationship, which could undermine the US’s position in the international system and challenge its central role.
- 3. The assumption that Moscow might be willing to adjust its relations with Beijing, given the right incentives, is weak. Unlike during the Cold War, when ideological differences separated China and the Soviet Union, today’s Russian-Chinese partnership is driven by shared opposition to Western hegemony. The two countries benefit from economic cooperation, joint military exercises, and diplomatic coordination in multilateral institutions such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Given these factors, the likelihood of Russia abandoning its close ties with China in exchange for uncertain US concessions remains slim.



China and Russia already have been building very close strategic and economic links, and the two are allied in trying to reduce the dominance of the dollar as a reserve currency and prime currency of trade, promote alternative institutions to the post-WWII order, and back up a growing network of linked authoritarian states around the world, from Venezuela to Vietnam and Iran, etc.⁶⁵

On the other hand, Trump’s strategy, particularly his tariff policies and pressure on NATO countries to tighten their budgets allocate more funds for military spending, could weaken the Western alliance. This may create a rift between Europe and the US, potentially even causing divisions within the EU, which would, in turn, undermine US pressure on China.



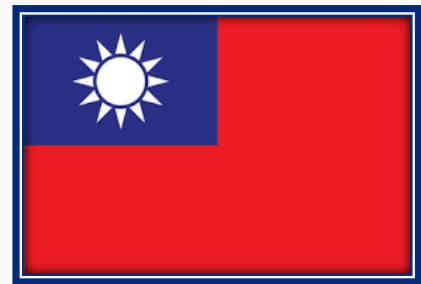
Furthermore, despite the rapprochement over Ukraine, Russian-US differences persist in other regions, including the Middle East, Latin America and beyond. Additionally, the trade volume between the two countries is modest compared to their trade with China.⁶⁶ In this context, the rapprochement between Russia and the US appears to be more “tactical” than strategic, primarily aimed at weakening Russian-Chinese relations.

In addition to the points mentioned, some argue that the US response to Russia’s control of over 20% of Ukraine’s territory could embolden China to take action, potentially seeking to seize Taiwan due to the perceived abandonment of US allies. This



may lead Taiwan to question the reliability of US support in the event of Chinese military action,⁶⁷ especially given the distinct historical context between China and Taiwan, which differs from that of Ukraine. Furthermore, Taiwan's lack of membership in the UN adds another layer of complexity to its international position. Furthermore, the US has accepted the principle of “one country, two systems,” similar to the situation in Hong Kong. The Chinese leadership is aware of this and is waiting for the right moment to reannex Taiwan. Therefore, the US-Russian rapprochement will undermine US credibility with its allies, weakening Taiwan’s resistance to pressure from Beijing, and in the end, this dynamic will tilt the balance in favor of China.

Another opposing view argues that the US is shifting its focus away from its commitment to Ukraine’s security, and Europe’s more broadly, in order to prioritize the defense of Taiwan against the Chinese threat. This strategy also aims to discourage Russia from supporting China on the Taiwan issue. This perspective was implicitly expressed by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.⁶⁸



The weakness of this hypothetical strategy lies in the difficulty of driving a wedge in the Russian-Chinese relationship, which would require a substantial amount of time. Given the depth of their bilateral ties, strengthened through international organizations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a period much longer than Trump’s four-year term would be needed. This raises doubts about the feasibility of the strategy.

Conclusion

The third hypothesis, which suggests dismantling the Russian-Chinese relationship, appears to be the weakest of the three. In contrast, the first and second hypotheses hold comparable relevance. The first hypothesis, centered on nationalism, is clearly reflected in Trump’s stance, as a significant segment of American society shares his opposition to globalization. This perspective is further reinforced by the pragmatism of the American mindset. However, the second hypothesis—whether framed as conspiracy or collusion—is supported by evidence that is difficult to dismiss, particularly given its diverse sources and the credibility of the information available. Its plausibility is reinforced by several indicators, including Trump’s psychological traits—narcissism, paranoia, frequent dishonesty, and lack of moral values. Additionally, those endorsing the conspiracy or collusion theory include official, security, academic and judicial bodies at both local and international levels. Furthermore, Trump’s disruption of the Western alliance and the alienation of key partners such as the EU, Canada, Denmark,



Mexico and South Africa... have significant implications that should not be underestimated.

On the other hand, Russian officials and policymakers, perhaps driven by their own motives, tend to downplay the extent of US “transformation,” particularly given the influence of anti-Russian forces within the Republican Party, the Democrats and intelligence circles, which act as a check on Trump’s ability to push his agenda too far in favor of Russia. Furthermore, with Trump’s term limited to just four years, there may not be enough time to bring about a strategic shift in a highly institutionalized society like the US.



The common thread in all the information I’ve found is the characterization of Trump as an unpredictable figure. Most studies describe him this way, suggesting that his unpredictability could lead to unforeseen developments for him, his administration, or even US society at large.



Endnotes

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