

# Russia



## Russia – Talking Points & Takeaways

**If you want to stop terrorism & secure loose nukes, you've got to work with Russia. Like it or not.** Russia has thousands of nuclear weapons; some are poorly guarded. They also face an internal threat from radical Islamic groups, and have intelligence and resources to tackle that challenge. If America wants to stop terrorism – especially nuclear terrorism – we've got to make common cause with Russia on this.

**President Obama's "Russia Reset" is delivering results, after years of conservatives delivering nothing but rhetoric.** The US and Russia have signed the New START Treaty, which reduces the likelihood of nuclear war and nuclear terrorism. Russia is allowing the US to use Russian airspace to supply NATO troops in Afghanistan. And the US has gotten Russia to agree to the strongest ever United Nations sanctions against Iran. That's progress.

**Russia has recovered from its post Cold War slump – it's a major power now.** Russia spent the 1990s adrift, and felt that the US tried to take advantage of its weakened position. But Russia's economy has recovered, it outguns its immediate neighbors militarily, and it commands a massive nuclear arsenal. In other words, Russia is a proud and powerful country with a chip on its shoulder against being "bossed around" by America.

**Just because it's good to work hand-in-glove on some things, it doesn't mean we see eye-to-eye on everything.** The US and Russia have good reason to make common cause on terrorism and nuclear weapons. But Russia does not share America's respect for human rights or democratic freedoms. We can also expect that Russia will throw around its weight toward neighbors in Europe and Central Asia, and may use its oil and natural gas wealth as a political weapon. We can build on common interests. But we don't confuse these with common values, and our alliances in Europe must remain solid.



## Russia: The Basics

**Size:** 6,592,772 square miles – Nearly double the size of the U.S.

**Population:** 140,041,247 – Roughly half the population of the U.S.

**Major Ethnic Groups:** Russian 79.8%, Tatar 3.8%, Ukrainian 2%

**Major Religions:** Russian Orthodox 15-20%, Muslim 10-15%, other Christian denominations 2%

**Economy:** Thanks to oil and gas exports, Russia experienced consistent economic growth for nearly a decade, but was hit hard by the financial crisis in 2008.

**Capital:** Moscow

**Freedom House Political Rights Score:** Not Free

## Russia – Key Players



**Vladimir Putin:** is now the Prime Minister of Russia. He served as President from 2000-2008 but was barred from another term. A former KGB officer, he often takes an antagonistic line toward the US in foreign affairs, especially after the Iraq War. He has rolled back human rights (Freedom House has removed Russia from its list of democracies) and sought to reassert Russian influence in Central Asia. Domestically, Putin oversaw nearly a decade of solid economic growth and strengthened the state after its post-Cold War free fall, both of which made him popular. If there was a real election in Russia, Putin would probably win. Many believe him to be the most powerful man in Russian politics, even though the president legally holds more power.



**Dmitry Medvedev:** has been Russia's President since 2008 when he was elected with more than 70% of the popular vote; an election whose legitimacy was contested by some monitoring groups. Medvedev was Putin's hand chosen successor to the presidency, and many question whether Medvedev is a figurehead president, with Prime Minister Putin pulling the strings. Many believe that Medvedev has more liberal leanings than Putin – he is concerned about corruption and rule of law, for example – but he has not diverged substantially from Putin during the two years of his presidency.

## Under Clinton: A Weak Russia Feels Victimized

President Clinton appeared to establish a solid relationship with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and the two nations cooperated closely on nuclear issues. However, many Russians felt that US actions after its victory in the Cold War were designed to weaken Russia, fueling a sense of resentment towards the US.



**NATO Expansion.** The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created in part to contain in the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, Clinton saw NATO as a way to consolidate democratic gains in Eastern Europe. The US welcomed Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into the alliance. Russia opposed the “Western alliance” expanding to its borders.

**Securing Nuclear Materials.** Thanks in large part to the efforts of US Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, the US and Russia worked together to secure nuclear material and remove weapons from former Soviet countries.



**Financial Crisis.** In the late 1990s, Russia’s stock, bond, and currency markets collapsed – its stock market lost more than 75% of its value and poverty jumped to 40%. Many Russians laid part of the blame on economic policies pushed by the US through the World Bank and Int’l Monetary Fund.

**Kosovo/Serbia.** The US/NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, intended to prevent a genocide in Kosovo, was thoroughly opposed by the Russians, who have historically viewed Serbia as a Slavic ally.

## Under Bush: A Resentful Russia Grows Stronger

Although President Bush famously looked in to President Vladimir Putin’s eyes and “saw his soul,” US-Russian relations severely deteriorated during the Bush years. The combination of Russia’s growing oil wealth and economic recovery, US difficulties in Iraq, and Russia’s resentment over the 1990s allowed it to take a harsher line against the US.



**Post 9/11.** Putin was the first foreign leader to call Bush after 9/11 and Russia agreed to let the US use Central Asian bases for the Afghanistan war.

**Missile Defense/ABM Treaty.** The US pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to develop a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The US claimed it was to stop Iranian missiles, Russia claimed the system threatened its own security.

**Iraq.** Russia stood in total opposition to the war in Iraq, due in part to its long relationship with Iraq. Opinion of the US in Russia plummeted, and as difficulties in Iraq mounted, Russia had a freer hand to criticize and oppose US policies.

**Georgia, Color Revolutions, & Kosovo.** Democratic reformers came to power in 3 former Soviet states: Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The US looked to bolster them, Russia aimed to reassert influence. The most extreme case was Russia’s invasion of Georgia. Questions remain regarding who started it, but it led to the worst US-Russian relations since the Cold War. Russian support of “breakaway regions” in Georgia is perhaps a response to US recognition of Kosovo as independent nation.

## Obama Tries Pragmatism for a US-Russia Reset

President Obama entered office with a desire to improve – or “reset” – US-Russia relations. At the heart of this policy approach are three basic premises.

**Premise #1: Russia is a Major Power, Not Weak as it was in the 1990s.** Thanks to the high price of oil and natural gas, Russia made major economic strides in the 2000s. Although the recent financial crisis has hit Russia hard, the US should acknowledge that Russia’s nuclear arsenal, large military, historic ties in Europe and Central Asia, and nationalistic pride make it a country that cannot be pushed around.



**Premise #2: The US & Russia Share Common Interests on Global Problems.** The US and Russia have very similar interests and desires regarding the fight against terrorism (Russia has been fighting domestic terrorism from Muslim extremists for years, in part due to its human rights failures) and halting the spread of nuclear weapons. Like it or not, those issues cannot be solved unless the US and Russia work together.

**Premise #3: Reset, NOT Romance; Differences Remain.** Although the US and Russia share common interests, they have major disagreements over democracy, Iran’s nuclear program, missile defense, and solving the global financial crisis. These will continue to pose challenges.

## US & Russia: Points of Cooperation

**New START & Nuclear Weapons.** As a follow on to the 1991 START Treaty (negotiations begun under Reagan), the new START treaty reduces the likelihood of nuclear terrorism and nuclear war, whether accidental or intentional. The New START treaty limits Russia and the US to 1,550 strategic nuclear weapons – plenty for our security – and allows for US missile defense. By limiting nuclear weapons, it helps the US and Russia – which account for 95% of the world’s nuclear weapons – to account for and safeguard loose nuclear material and stop the spread of nuclear weapons to new nations.



**Afghanistan.** The US and Russia share a concern about the stability of neighboring Central Asia, the trafficking of narcotics through the region, and the rise of Islamic militancy. Thanks to Obama administration diplomacy, Russia now provides a critical transit corridor from the north and strategic airlift to support increased US military presence in Afghanistan.

**Terrorism & Crime.** Russia has to deal with the threat of homegrown Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, while also facing the challenge of narcotics trafficking and human trafficking. Since the US is also fighting terrorism and trafficking, it creates another opportunity for common ground with Russia.

## Diplomacy Worked on Iran: But It's a Flashpoint

In May 2010, Russia agreed to US efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program through tough UN sanctions. However, the sanctions cost Russia a lot; Russia has invested in Iran's civilian nuclear program and wants the option of completing some military sales already contracted to Iran.



**Yes to Sanctions.** In 2009, Russia started expressing concern over Iran's nuclear program. With U.S. support, Russia first offered to enrich Iran's uranium – so Iran could develop isotopes for medical treatments without attaining the ability to enrich uranium to bomb-making grade. In May 2010, Russia agreed to a tough round of UN sanctions against Iran.

**Russian support for arms sanctions is a big win for diplomacy.** Iran is a major buyer of Russian arms, and Russia has a \$1 billion investment in Iran's nuclear power plant at Bushehr, so sanctions will cost Russia real money. That's an accomplishment for US diplomacy.



**However, there is a sticking point to sanctions:** Iran had already purchased surface-to-air missiles from Russia -- possibly to protect its nuclear program. Russia has not sent the weapons out of concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, Russia wants the right to legally complete the sale if and when it chooses. To accept sanctions, it required this loophole.

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## Has Obama abandoned allies in Eastern Europe to make nice with Russia? On the contrary!

Critics of the Obama administration have argued that the President has sold out important allies – such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Georgia – to get better cooperation from Russia. But nothing could be further from the truth. For example:



**Poland.** Obama recently began the rotating deployment of surface-to-air Patriot missiles in Poland, accompanied by 100 US military personnel. And the administration did this over Russian protests.

**Baltic States.** 500 Marines and two F-15s, led by the commander of US Air Force in Europe, traveled to Estonia in June for a NATO exercise. In the fall, over 2,000 personnel from the three Baltic states and the US will conduct another exercise - the biggest in the region since the 3 countries became NATO member in 2004. They also got a NATO contingency plan for defense against external attack.

**Georgia.** The US has provided hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to Georgia since Obama took office, and doubled spending on bilateral defense cooperation, based on 2008 numbers.

**Missile Defense.** Obama has switched gears on missile defense toward a proven system that works and is better able to protect Europe and the US from Iranian missiles.

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## US & Russia: Points of Contention



**Missile Defense.** Russia is completely opposed to the deployment of a missile defense shield based in Eastern Europe, while the US is determined to develop a missile defense system that can defend the US and its allies from an Iranian missile. Obama gained the right to have missile defense under the new START treaty, but Russia could unravel the treaty over disagreements over the meaning of this. Russian concerns over US missile defense threaten to trip up cooperation over other issues, such as nuclear weapons reductions.



**Democracy & Human Rights.** The trend in Russia has been toward rising autocracy, corruption, and a major decrease in freedom of the press and civil society. Freedom House recently removed Russia from its list of democracies. Russia's hostility toward democracy and human rights puts a major limit on US-Russian cooperation.

**NATO & Russia's Neighbors.** Russia remains opposed to the expansion of NATO in its backyard, especially to Georgia and Ukraine.

## Russia Using Energy as a Weapon

**Oil and Natural Gas Wealth.** Russia is rich in oil and gas, and has used its energy exports as a means to boost its economy and exert influence abroad. This poses problems for the United States.



**Opposing US Policies.** Energy exports have given Russia resources to have a freer hand in foreign policy. A strong economy has emboldened Russia to take a hard line in opposing US foreign policy, even in regions of little interest to Russia, such as in Zimbabwe. While the current economic crisis has hit Russia and its economy badly, oil and gas will continue to provide Russia with significant wealth.

**Playing Hardball with Europe.** The European Union imports almost half of its natural gas and 30 percent of its oil from Russia. That makes it hard for the US and Europe to show a united front against Russia on critical issues, such as pressuring Russia to pull troops out of Georgia. Russia's energy control is a major reason for Europe's serious focus on developing alternative energies.

**Asserting Control Over Former Soviet States.** Russia has used its control of natural gas pipelines to exert control over former Soviet states. Russia has cut off oil and gas during disputes with Ukraine and the Czech Republic, and once stopped the flow of gas to Georgia in the middle of winter. Recently, Russia granted Ukraine a 30% discount on gas prices in return for rights to base Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the Crimea until 2042, a move that helps pro-Russian factions in Ukraine, hurting Western-leaning democratic activists.

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