



Putin Deepens Russia's Ties with US Adversaries as US-Russia Talks Begin

By Karolina Hird

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Russia's outreach to American adversaries continues despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts at rapprochement with the Trump administration. Putin spoke with People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping on February 24, the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[1] Putin and Xi discussed the Sino-Russian comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation, and Putin informed Xi about recent US-Russia talks regarding Russia's demands on Ukraine. Russian officials also met with Iranian and North Korean officials on February 25. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and a Russian delegation met with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in Tehran.[2] Both sides highlighted the recently signed Russo-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement and the expansion of Russo-Iranian relations.[3] Araghchi decried the United States' "maximum pressure" campaign and the Trump administration's recent sanctions against Iran's oil industry and stated that Iran is "moving on the nuclear issue in cooperation and coordination with Russia and China." [4] Araghchi's comments are noteworthy in the context of a International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report previewed by the Associated Press (AP) on February 26 that shows a dramatic increase in Iranian stocks of high-enriched uranium, as well as Iranian statements that Iran would engage in no negotiations as long as sanctions were in place.[5]

A delegation of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) arrived in Moscow on February 25 at the invitation of Russia's ruling United Russia Party.[6] WPK Politburo member Ri Hi Yong headed the delegation, which met with North Korean Ambassador to Russia Sin Hong Chol and United Russia General Council Commission on International Cooperation Deputy Chairman Andrei Klimov.[7] WPK and United Russia representatives discussed increasing cooperation in accord with the Russo-North Korean Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, which entered into force in December 2024. The United States sanctioned the WPK in 2016 over North Korea's continued violations of numerous international nuclear and missile proliferation agreements.[8]

Russia is using diplomatic engagements with these important Kremlin partners and US adversaries to amplify Kremlin narratives about the war in Ukraine. Lavrov thanked Iranian officials "for their balanced position, based on an understanding of the root causes of the Ukraine crisis" during his February 25 meeting with Araghchi.[9] Lavrov first mentioned the "root causes" issue during a speech on December 26, 2024, in which he described them as NATO's alleged violations of promises not to expand eastward and Ukraine's alleged discrimination against Russian-speaking minorities in eastern Ukraine.[10] The Kremlin's invocation of these so-called "root causes" of the war is an attempt to repackage the Kremlin's standard demands for regime

change and the demilitarization of Ukraine—essentially maximalist demands for Ukraine's total capitulation—as well as the rollback of the NATO alliance from Eastern Europe.[11] Lavrov also brought up “root causes” of the war during a meeting with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 20, and Putin invoked the same concept during his February 24 call with Xi.[12] Kremlin officials appear to be increasingly using their diplomatic engagements with Iran, North Korea, and the PRC, to propagate the “root causes” rhetoric and create the impression that Russia's closest allies are supportive of the Kremlin line on the war, thereby seeming to build a coalition of like-minded states that will support Russia's efforts to compel Ukraine, Europe, and the United States to accept all of Russia's demands.[13]

Putin requires the support of these US adversaries to sustain his war in Ukraine. Russia has increasingly had to rely on Iran, North Korea, and the PRC to compensate for the mounting economic, financial, industrial, and personnel costs imposed by over three years of war.[14] Iran has provided Russia with thousands of Shahed-model strike drones, freeing up significant parts of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) to pursue the production of other needed weapons.[15] North Korea has sent millions of artillery rounds to Russia, and North Korean ammunition currently comprises over half of Russia's total ammunition stocks, according to Ukrainian intelligence.[16] Up to 12,000 North Korean troops have been deployed to combat operations in Russia's Kursk Oblast, replacing Russian manpower that Putin would otherwise have had to commit to the area.[17] The PRC's material support for Russia has been more covert due to Chinese concerns over losing access to Western markets, but US intelligence has warned that Beijing is providing Moscow with military technologies, microelectronics, chips, machine tools, and even geospatial intelligence—all of which are critical inputs to the Russian war machine.[18]

Russia's efforts to consolidate a bloc of America's most significant adversaries continue even as the Kremlin pretends to seek an improved relationship with the United States. As Russian diplomats have re-established contacts with their American counterparts, they have also continued to court allies whose core ideologies are premised on the elimination of US leadership in the world and the destruction, conquest, or absorption of important US allies. Putin's victory in Ukraine, either on the battlefield or through negotiations, will empower and enable the PRC, North Korea, and Iran in their respective theaters. These adversaries are counting on a Russian victory in Ukraine—and it is in America's national security interest to deny them this victory and weaken the entente that has coalesced around Russia's invasion of Ukraine rather than strengthening it. Russia, in particular, appears to be relying on a charm offensive toward Washington to obscure its deep commitment to weakening the United States and its friends and allies around the world. The Trump administration should be clear-eyed about this larger Russian threat.



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