

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 3, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street Northwest  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

I write today regarding aggressive actions taken by Russia around the world and to express my deep concern at this administration's apparent unwillingness to rebuke these actions. The policies of this administration have empowered Russia to brazenly disregard international conventions and institutions that have long been upheld by American leadership. Instead, this administration has given the green light to Russian President Vladimir Putin to attack American soldiers, pay bounties for their deaths, meddle in democratic elections and disregard basic human rights in Russia and around the world.

I, like so many of my colleagues, am appalled by the recent revelation of an intelligence assessment saying that Russia provided the Taliban with payments to attack U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan. This is a notable escalation of Kremlin aggression toward U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan and is indicative of a close alliance between Russian intelligence operatives and the Taliban. Despite the State Department raising this issue with Russian counterparts, the President has called the intelligence and conclusions into question and has yet to take any action to respond—despite numerous phone calls with Putin since the intelligence was revealed.

Given the President's lack of response to this unprecedented incident, it comes as no surprise that Russia has continued to endanger the lives of our troops in other theaters. On August 28, Russian pilots in Europe crossed within 100 feet of the nose of an American B-52 aircraft over the Black Sea and in international waters, causing turbulence and restricting the B-52's ability to maneuver. This dangerous action comes on the heels of the President's decision to remove over one third of U.S. troops from Germany—a perplexing decision that will further limit U.S. operations around the world and that the Kremlin has vocally and explicitly welcomed.

In the Middle East, after weeks of escalatory actions, Russian forces in Northeast Syria directly assaulted U.S. troops by colliding into U.S. vehicles on August 25. The encounter resulted in concussion-like symptoms in several U.S. military personnel. Again, instead of condemning

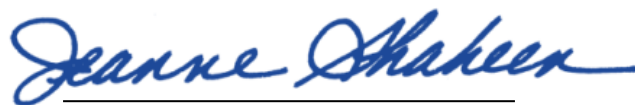
these incidents and supporting U.S. forces in Syria, this administration has allowed Russia to pursue a strategy of encroachment and assault without response.

Both incidents cited above are part of a predictable, yet escalatory pattern by the Kremlin. Unfortunately, the administration's response has become equally predictable in its silence and inability to stand against violent and aggressive actions against our troops. In December 2018, my Senate colleagues and I sent a letter to President Trump, warning of this very issue. In the letter, we said that the U.S. withdrawal of forces in Syria would bolster Russia and diminish support for U.S. allies. We wrote that "any sign of weakness perceived by...Russia will only result in their increased presence in the region."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this warning has been born out. Russia has taken advantage of the diminished U.S. presence to attempt to further box out U.S. troops, and even longstanding U.S. partners who don't even see eye to eye, like the Syrian Democratic Forces and Turkey, have turned to Russia for assistance.

Russia has long been seeking a vacuum in U.S. leadership in order to extend its reach and power. Under this administration, Putin has found a clear opening. By refusing to establish a broad policy to counter Russian malign efforts, President Trump and his administration have allowed these tactics to pay off and thus ensured that they will be used again. Without American leadership, Putin and his associates will continue to interfere in foreign elections, assassinate political opponents at home and abroad and engage in cyber-attacks on elections, infrastructures and companies.

The lack of a strong and cohesive U.S. response to Russia's escalation against our troops worldwide has both contributed to and reaffirmed Putin's strategy to achieve his policy priorities by ignoring international norms, enabling dictators and autocrats and provoking the U.S. and our allies into compliance. Far from blocking or countering Russian actions and malign influence, the policies of this administration have emboldened a more aggressive Russia, endangering our troops and citizens worldwide.

Sincerely,



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Jeanne Shaheen  
Ranking Member  
Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/news/press/in-case-you-missed-it-shaheen-graham-bipartisan-group-of-senators-urge-trump-administration-to-reconsider-withdrawing-us-forces-from-syria>

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CC: Secretary Mark T. Esper, Department of Defense  
Acting Secretary Chad Wolf, Department of Homeland Security