United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6225

September 15, 2026

Dear Colleague:

As the House considers the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, I want to explain why, as Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I supported this legislation despite my strong opposition to President Trump's misuse of tariff authorities.

I did not come to this decision lightly or quickly, but the facts driving my decision are stark: Russia is escalating its war, Ukrainian civilians are dying in increasing numbers, Russian energy sales continue to finance Putin's war machine and Russia is increasingly testing European and NATO security. This is the reality against which Congress must judge this legislation.

In the first six months of 2026, the United Nations verified that 1,396 civilians were killed and 7,978 were injured in Ukraine—a 37 percent increase over the same period in 2025 and 114 percent higher than in 2024. The U.N. found that this increase was driven largely by Russian long-range attacks on urban centers far from the front.

Then came July: 437 civilians killed and 2,610 injured in a single month, a 70 percent increase from July 2025. Civilian deaths were the highest since May 2022, and child casualties were the highest since April 2022.

These are not simply battlefield casualties. Russian attacks are killing Ukrainians in cities and towns, on railway platforms and in their homes. Russia has also employed what have been described as "double-tap" attacks—striking and then striking again when first responders and bystanders may be responding to the first attack.

Russia's aggression is increasingly testing NATO security. German authorities attributed to Russia an attempted attack involving an explosive-laden drone at Leipzig/Halle Airport—an airport where citizens of all nations, including our own, traverse daily. And just this weekend, a Russian drone struck a passenger train at Yahodyn station near the Polish border, shortly after a diplomatic train carrying former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt and European security officials had passed through. As Members of Congress, we know all too well that these reports are just the tip of the iceberg. European governments continue to confront sabotage, cyber operations, and other hybrid activity attributed to Russia—and our own troops and diplomats are also unfortunately seeing firsthand the results of Russia's close relationship with Iran in the Middle East.

This is what Vladimir Putin is doing while we debate this bill.

The United States and our allies have imposed significant sanctions on Russia since the invasion. But sanctions are only effective if they continue to impose meaningful costs. Russia has adapted by rerouting commerce, using intermediaries and alternative payment mechanisms, building a shadow fleet and deepening relationships with countries willing to continue doing business with it.

China illustrates the problem. In August, China was the world's largest purchaser of Russian fossil fuels, accounting for 51 percent of Russia's revenues from its top five fossil-fuel importers—€8.4 billion in one month. China's unloadings of Russian seaborne crude alone were 62 percent higher in August 2026 than in August 2025. Coupled with the fact that China continues to provide over 90% of the sanctioned technology and chemicals Russia needs to build kamikaze drones and artillery shells, it's clear a new approach is necessary.

That is why this legislation's secondary economic pressure makes sense. When direct pressure on the target is insufficient, the United States must impose consequences on those enabling the target's conduct.

The targeted economic measures in this bill are aimed at the countries sustaining Russian energy revenues and sanctions evasion—they are not a general authorization to tariff the world.

This is why I'm concerned that as Ukraine fights for its survival, several arguments against this legislation rely on hypothetical uses of the authority ("what ifs") rather than the statutory limits Congress actually wrote.

Critics have suggested that the bill gives the President unrestricted authority to impose 100 percent tariffs on virtually any country he chooses. This is a gross mischaracterization. The bill directs its secondary tariff mechanism only toward the five largest importers of Russian crude oil or natural gas and the five leading countries defying our laws and facilitating Russian oil sanctions evasion. The bill does not define the European Union as a "country" or provide the President with broad discretion to go after our allies. On the contrary, it provides a clear exemption for countries purchasing less than China's share of Russia's natural-gas exports and that have taken significant steps to reduce those purchases.

The legislation also goes well beyond tariffs. It imposes primary and secondary sanctions on Russian officials and oligarchs, foreign actors supporting Russia's war, financial institutions and the shadow fleet Russia uses to surreptitiously move energy exports. My team and I heard directly from foreign governments that the shadow fleet provisions, in particular, would cause foreign energy companies to stop purchasing Russian oil upon passage of this bill. These companies would not wait for implementation because the exposure to sanctions is enough to stop the behavior. Think of the impact of cutting off Russia's revenue from the shadow fleet—an estimated $100 billion annually—and the effect that would have on Ukraine. This is not something to casually dismiss.

Critics argue that President Trump already has authorities he could use against Russia and has chosen not to use them. The shadow fleet sanctions provision clearly demonstrates otherwise, but there is some truth in that argument. Yet, I would encourage colleagues in the House to draw the opposite conclusion. If Congress believes greater economic pressure should be placed on Russia, a President's unwillingness to exercise discretionary authority is an argument for Congress to act, not an argument for Congress to surrender the field.

Now, let's consider the consequences of doing nothing.

Congress's failure to impose additional costs would send a dangerous signal. Putin would see civilian casualties rising dramatically. He would see Russian missiles and drones continuing to strike Ukrainian cities. He would see Russian operations increasingly testing European security. And he would see Washington divided over whether to respond.

The Kremlin is watching. Kyiv is watching. Our NATO allies are watching. So are Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang.

Every month Russia continues earning billions from energy exports is another month those revenues can sustain its military. Every month Ukraine waits means more missiles, drones, kidnapped children, destroyed homes and funerals.

Years from now, the procedural arguments surrounding this legislation will be footnotes. What will matter is whether the United States acted when Ukraine needed us—or whether Vladimir Putin concluded that he could simply wait us out. History will judge what we do at this moment.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Shaheen

Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee