

# [***Exclusive: Pentagon's Russian Oil Red Line Questioned***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C33-P5T1-DY68-11XF-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Pentagon spokesman Charlie Dietz told Newsweek the U.S. does not support strikes inside Russia but oil refineries play a major role in the Kremlin's war effort.

**Body**

The [*Pentagon*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/pentagon?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s red line on Ukraine's drone strikes on Russian energy infrastructure is under scrutiny after an investigation found that some targeted oil refineries have supplied President [*Vladimir Putin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s military with fuel in the ongoing war.

Kyiv began its [*drone campaign targeting Russian refineries*](https://www.newsweek.com/russia-oil-drone-strike-threat-ukraine-bombs-1880307?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in early January, nearly two years into the war, obstructing gasoline production in Russia and cutting Moscow's export revenues, which are at the heart of the country's war economy.

At least 13 successful attacks have been carried out on Russian oil refineries during the conflict so far, targeting some of the largest in the country and facilities deep inside Russian territory, according to Ukraine. The drone strikes have already disrupted at least 14 percent of Russian oil refinery capacity, the Pentagon's intelligence agency said this month.

Olha Stefanishyna, a Ukrainian deputy prime minister, said in March that Russian oil refineries were [*legitimate military targets*](https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-russia-drones-oil-refineries-smolensk-1893541?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in the war, although the strikes aren't typically directly claimed by Kyiv but by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) instead.

U.K. newspaper the *Financial Times,* citing unnamed U.S. officials, reported in the same month that Washington wanted Ukraine to halt the attacks, fearing that targeting such energy facilities [*could provoke retaliation and drive up global oil prices*](https://www.newsweek.com/biden-election-ukraine-drone-oil-russia-1894017?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

The warnings come ahead of this year's U.S. presidential showdown, which will see President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) face a tough re-election bid. Gas prices are typically a sensitive topic during presidential election campaigns.

U.S. Secretary of Defense [*Lloyd Austin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/lloyd-austin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in early April warned that attacks on Russian refineries could have "a knock-on effect in terms of the global energy situation."

Ukraine is "better served in going after tactical and operational targets that can directly influence the current fight," he told the [*Senate*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/senate?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) Armed Services committee.

But the non-governmental organization Global Witness [*said in new analysis shared exclusively with Newsweek*](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/fossil-gas/revealed-russian-oil-refineries-attacked-ukrainian-drones-supplied-military-units/) that a number of these targeted facilities have played a role in Putin's ability to wage war in Ukraine and the Biden administration "prioritizes the flow of Russian oil."

Citing Russian railway data and military procurement contracts also viewed by *Newsweek*, the nonprofit group said its investigation proves that these refineries have been supplying Russia's army in Ukraine, and clearly constitute legitimate military targets.

A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers on Monday also penned a letter to Austin, urging the Pentagon to authorize the use of U.S.-provided weapons to strike "strategic targets" within Russian territory "under certain circumstances."

When approached with the findings, Charlie Dietz, a Pentagon spokesman, told *Newsweek* that the U.S. has "been very clear that we do not support or enable strikes inside Russia."

"The security assistance we provide them is for use within Ukraine (to include Crimea). And the Ukrainian government understands our position," Dietz said. "For one thing, targeting Russia's oil refineries can negatively impact global security and stability. But ultimately Ukraine is responsible for its own operations, so I'll let them speak for themselves."

Court documents obtained by Global Witness show that two facilities struck by Ukraine in February, March and May—Russian oil giant LUKOIL's Volgograd refinery, the largest in southern Russia, and NORSI, Russia's fourth-largest refinery—won contracts with [*Russian military*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/russian-military?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) organizations prior to the war.

Both facilities supplied fuel to Russia's defense ministry and Russia's intelligence agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB), in 2018 and 2020.

Data provided by the NGO Anti-Corruption Data Collective (ACDC) indicates those facilities have continued to supply substantial quantities of diesel or jet fuel to Russia's western and southern military districts during the war.

"These army divisions contain units that have been active in Ukraine since the Kremlin ordered its invasion in February 2022," Global Witness said, noting that the southern military district division may have been involved in the siege of Mariupol between March and May 2022, during which at least 8,000 civilians were reported to have been killed.

Companies mentioned in this piece did not respond to requests for comment from Global Witness. *Newsweek* has contacted Russia's Defense Ministry for comment by email.

There is a "clear precedent" for Ukraine's drone attacks on Russian oil refineries, Global Witness said.

"But ***politics***, not precedent, is the principle animating the U.S. position," the nonprofit group said, adding that the Biden administration's stance appears to be part of a broader goal not to disturb the flow of Russian oil, for fear of disrupting global oil markets.

That logic is "flawed," Global Witness said, noting that the U.S. does not buy any fuel from Russia directly, and rising oil prices are largely a result of current tensions in the Middle East, per the International Energy Agency's most recent oil market report.

The U.S. has consistently prioritized the flow of Russian oil throughout the war, Global Witness said.

"This oil-driven approach is a stark departure from the rhetoric Biden deployed in the days after the invasion when he announced America's embargo on Russian crude, telling the world America 'would not be part of subsidizing Putin's war,'" the organization said.

"The dispute over the attacks highlights the distortions of fossil fuel economics, by which the U.S. is desperate to protect the oil exports of an adversary, at the expense of an ally under attack," it added. "Unfortunately for Ukraine, oil is taking precedence."

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[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2394981/pentagons-russian-oil-red-line-questioned.jpg)

**Graphic**

Pentagon's Russian Oil Red Line Questioned

Newsweek illustration/ Getty Images

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