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## NATO's Fraying Unity on Russia Policy

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The Biden administration's policy toward the Russia-Ukraine war was built on the assumption of widespread international support for a coercive response to Russia's invasion. Even during the early weeks of the conflict, however, there were indications that Washington's belief was faulty. Biden's boast that the world stood united in its opposition to Russia's "aggression" was little more than wishful thinking. Barely a week after the onset of the war, there were extensive defections from a United Nations General Assembly vote calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces. In addition to the five nay votes, there were 35 abstentions—even though the resolution did not commit U.N. members to take any substantive action.

Most of the abstentions came from Africa and Asia, and the vote proved to be a harbinger of widespread indifference to the war, combined with tenacious opposition to Washington's drive to isolate and punish Russia. As time passed, the problem only grew worse. Aside from NATO and longstanding U.S. allies in East Asia, the global map showed almost no support for economic sanctions against Russia, much less for economic and military backing for Ukraine.

During the early months of the war, NATO did appear to be reasonably united behind Washington's policy—with some notable exceptions, such as Hungary and Turkey. The contrast between NATO's perspective and the position that countries elsewhere in the world adopted was glaring. Hudson Institute scholar Walter Russell Mead provided an apt summary of Washington's lack of success in broadening the anti-Russia coalition beyond the network of traditional U.S. allies. "The West has never been more closely aligned. It has also rarely been more alone. Allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization plus Australia and Japan are united in revulsion against Vladimir Putin's war and are cooperating with the most sweeping sanctions since World War II. The rest of the world, not so much."

Despite massive U.S. diplomatic pressure on such key players as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa, that lack of wider support has not changed.

The administration could take some consolation in the apparent unity within NATO and in the fact that Russia's actions in Ukraine impelled Sweden and Finland to abandon their traditional policies of neutrality (in Sweden's case, a policy that had endured for 170 years) and seek membership in the alliance. NATO's existing members joined Washington in applying harsh sanctions against Moscow, and many of them also participated in the U.S.-led campaign to provide Kiev with an abundance of sophisticated weaponry.

Nevertheless, fissures in NATO's unity on Russia have become increasingly visible. As aforementioned, Hungary and Turkey were never fully on board. Hungarian Prime Minister

Viktor Orban made it clear from the beginning that his country would never send weapons to Ukraine. In addition, his endorsement of even the mildest economic sanctions against Russia was tepid and typically occurred only after delays resulting from his efforts to dilute the sanctions that NATO and the European Union were able to impose.

Orban's opposition to the West's overall anti-Russia policy has become noticeably more vocal, as he insists that democratic Europe is causing needless problems for itself by reflexively embracing the hardline approach Washington demands. His criticism spiked in mid-July when he contended that the E.U. had not just shot itself in the foot but had "shot itself in the lungs" by joining the U.S. crusade to coerce Russia with economic sanctions, especially the sanctions on natural gas and other energy supplies. If those measures were not reversed soon, he argued, they might well wreck Europe's economy and cause widespread suffering.

Turkey's deviation from Washington's policy is even greater than Hungary's apostasy, especially with respect to sanctions on energy supplies. Almost from the beginning, Ankara has given higher priority to ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible rather than trying to coerce, weaken, and humiliate Russia. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly offered to play the role of mediator. Ankara also is not above profiting from the soaring energy prices caused by Western sanctions. Turkey has positioned itself as the middleman in marketing Russia's oil exports, frequently selling them to fellow NATO members—at, of course, a substantial markup.

Erdogan also is becoming decidedly more outspoken in his criticism. In early September, he railed against Turkey's fellow NATO members for engaging in repeated provocations toward Moscow. Conversely, he hailed Ankara's "balanced" policy, which he pledged to continue.

That pragmatic, albeit somewhat cynical, approach stands in marked contrast to the strident, uncompromising attitude of the Biden administration and pro-Ukraine hawks in Congress. Leading a congressional delegation to Kiev in early May, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told President Volodymyr Zelensky that "we are on a frontier of freedom and your fight is a fight for everyone. Our commitment is to be there for you until the fight is done." Washington's willingness to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian has not waned. During his official visit to Kiev in early September, Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged lasting support for Ukraine. "We will support the people of Ukraine for as long as it takes," Blinken said in a statement, which accompanied a new military aid package.

There is growing uneasiness among European populations about the wisdom of using Ukraine to wage a proxy war against a nuclear-armed power, and that uneasiness has begun to creep into the political establishments in some countries other than Hungary and Turkey. Perhaps even more important, it has become exceedingly apparent that the strategy of imposing economic sanctions on Russia has backfired. That is especially true with respect to the energy sector. In August, Russia exported a record amount of crude oil. Russia's state-owned energy company, Gazprom, has doubled its revenue in 2022, despite sending far less natural gas to Europe. Higher prices and new markets elsewhere in the world have more than offset the loss of European customers. Such developments indicate that Russia is hardly on the verge of economic collapse because of Western sanctions. Indeed, populations in NATO member countries are now at risk of experiencing more pain than the Russian people from those sanctions as Moscow retaliates.

The resulting strains on European unity are increasingly evident. There is a noticeable split between what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once described as “old Europe”—longtime NATO members in Western Europe, such as France and Italy—and the alliance’s newer members along Russia’s western flank. The latter, especially Poland and the Baltic republics, remain fully committed to an uncompromising policy toward Moscow. Poland’s level of economic and military aid to Kiev is second only to the amount Washington is providing. On a per capita basis, Estonia is the largest contributor among NATO countries of aid to Ukraine.

Western European powers have resisted adopting extreme measures toward Russia, with Paris and Rome emphasizing that NATO’s goal must be to facilitate a peace accord, not humiliate Vladimir Putin. Economic strains are producing political changes that undermine support for Ukraine. In July, one party pulled out of Italy’s governing coalition, citing “the terrible choice” that Italian families face “of paying their electric bill or buying food.” The defection forced the resignation of Prime Minister Mario Draghi, who in June had traveled to Kiev to reiterate Italy’s support for Ukraine.

Even the German government, headed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, has quietly backed away from its initial enthusiastic support for the hardline policy that Washington favored. The proliferation of protests in German cities against skyrocketing prices is pressuring Scholz to adopt a more pragmatic policy. Such angry demonstrations are hardly confined to Germany. In early September, 70,000 people took to the streets of Prague to oppose not only the government’s energy policies but the overall EU and NATO confrontation with Russia.

European governments have scrambled to ease the economic pain resulting from the West’s sanctions against Moscow. Emergency financial aid programs for hard-pressed populations have been the most common measures. Some governments also have imposed price controls on fuel and other energy supplies, despite the long historical record that such controls only lead to shortages and black markets.

Under intense pressure from Washington, the G-7 adopted price caps on imports of Russian gas and oil. Violators supposedly would be subject to sanctions. The measure was the ultimate exercise in futile symbolism. Putin responded by threatening to cut off all energy exports to the West if the price caps violated existing contractual commitments. Moreover, not only were key international economic players, such as India and China, demonstrating no support for the West’s latest anti-Russia scheme, even some NATO and E.U. members balked. At least 10 of those countries voiced objections to the new G-7 controls, and the E.U. has thus far failed to implement those caps.

Indeed, the principal response at its September meeting was to approve, in principle, a “windfall plan.” Although the details of that policy remain to be fleshed out, the windfall plan would see governments skim off excess revenues from wind, nuclear, and coal-fired power plants that can currently sell their power at record prices heavily influenced by the cost of natural gas. E.U. governments would then use the money to soften consumer bills. The scheme entailed more than a small degree of irony. European governments proposed to seize some of the profits of nuclear and even wind power plants, which environmentalists had long touted as “clean energy” replacements for oil and natural gas.

Concerns about possible energy shortages mounted when leaks caused by explosions were discovered in both the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines. The evidence pointed to

sabotage. Russia and the European powers exchanged accusations of culpability. Whoever was the culprit, the effective result has been to increase the prospect (and the fear) of more serious shortages for European consumers.

Viktor Orban appears to be right: democratic Europe is now suffering from serious self-inflicted economic and social wounds. If Russia continues to withhold or even substantially reduce gas supplies in the coming months, it could lead to a very dark, cold winter in several European countries. Discontent about high prices and the uncertain availability of fuel already is mounting throughout Europe, and public opposition to sanctions is likely to increase as winter approaches. The probable governmental response would be to shutter factories and other commercial firms to preserve scarce supplies to keep homes heated at least at minimal levels. Strict energy rationing has already begun in some countries; however, further restricting commercial operations—which are already impacting firms, including food companies, in some countries—would virtually guarantee a nasty economic meltdown throughout the E.U. Indeed, it would likely intensify an emerging global recession.

Unfortunately, both the Biden administration and its deferential allies among Europe's political elites continue to be deaf to the rising anger of beleaguered European populations. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg epitomizes that attitude. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Stoltenberg stated that even though Europeans will face sharply rising energy costs this winter after levying sanctions against Russia, the continent has a “moral responsibility” to support Ukraine. “There are tough times ahead, but we have faced tough times together before,” Stoltenberg wrote. “The cost of not standing up for our values is always greater. For Ukraine's future and for ours, we must prepare for the winter war and stay the course.”

Corrupt, increasingly authoritarian Ukraine is not worth anything approaching the level of sacrifice now being demanded of the European people. Many European elites are still apparently willing to blindly follow Washington's anti-Russian policies, but populations in several countries are defecting. If they wish to survive politically, leaders in Central and Western Europe will have to do the same. Even the pro-war elites in the Baltics and other East European countries could discover that maintaining a stance of knee-jerk support for Kiev is not a winning political strategy. As Europe's dark, cold winter arrives, the NATO unity that the Biden administration loves to tout may be nothing more than a faint memory.

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