



US “Leadership” is Damaging Europe

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Democratic Europe has habitually craved U.S. leadership of the transatlantic community since the end of World War II. Indeed, President Donald Trump’s comment that he was willing to reconsider some of America’s alliance commitments induced borderline panic in Europe. When Joe Biden defeated Trump in 2020 and declared that “America is back,” the relief among European governments and populations was palpable.

Such fondness for U.S. leadership is misplaced, or at least excessive. Washington’s policies do not always serve Europe’s best interests; at times they even undermine those interests, while creating needless burdens and dangers. Dragging the European allies into the Afghanistan nation-building fiasco is a prime example. So too is the attempt by both the Trump and Biden administrations to enlist NATO members in a common front for a containment policy against China.

The most graphic case, though, is Washington’s insistence that European countries sign on to the U.S. campaign to isolate and punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Revulsion at Vladimir Putin’s war of aggression understandably caused Europe’s democratic nations to embrace the Biden administration’s call for punitive action. However, Washington’s multiple misjudgments are causing its European allies to endure the bulk of the collective pain caused by an increasingly dubious strategy.

The Biden foreign policy team made several major miscalculations from the outset of the Ukraine crisis. U.S. officials overestimated the extent of international unity in favor of a coercive policy toward Russia, they had an inflated sense of the West’s economic leverage against Putin, and they seriously underestimated Moscow’s ability to retaliate for the West’s imposition of economic sanctions. Europe is now paying a heavy price for Washington’s myopia and overconfidence.

Barely days into the war, Biden boasted that the world stood united in its opposition to Russia's aggression. But his assumption soon proved to be wishful thinking. Already in early March, there were extensive defections from a United Nations General Assembly vote calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces. In addition to the 5 "no" votes, there were 35 abstentions—even though the resolution did not commit UN members to take any substantive action.

Most of the abstentions came from nations in Africa and Asia, and the vote proved to be a harbinger of widespread indifference to the war and to Washington's call to isolate and punish Russia. Aside from NATO and longstanding U.S. allies in East Asia, the global map still shows almost no support for economic sanctions against Russia, much less for economic and military backing for Ukraine. Hudson Institute scholar Walter Russell Mead provides 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."

Most damaging for Biden's campaign to isolate Russia, Asia's two demographic and economic giants, India and China, have stubbornly remained on the sidelines. They continue even to exhibit a slight pro-Russia tilt despite Washington's sometimes excruciating diplomatic pressure.

The Biden administration not only overestimated global support for an anti-Russia policy, it overestimated the ability of even a united democratic West to inflict economic pain on that country. Initially, the Ruble plunged in value, and Biden referred to it derisively as "the Rubble." However, the Ruble has rebounded, and Russia's economy has cushioned the other shocks by increasing its links to China, Iran, and other countries.

Although Russia has experienced significant economic discomfort, it has not come close to being enough to alter the Kremlin's Ukraine policy. In August, Russia exported a record amount of crude oil, and the 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 more than offset the loss of European customers. Such developments indicate that Russia hardly is on the verge of economic collapse because of Western sanctions.

Indeed, there are growing signs that the sanctions strategy has backfired. Populations in NATO members now are at risk of experiencing more pain than the Russian people from those measures, and that problem is especially true with respect to the energy sector.

Just as the Biden administration overestimated the West's economic leverage on Russia, it greatly underestimated the Kremlin's ability to retaliate. The Kremlin's manipulation of energy supplies—especially natural gas flows to Europe has sent energy prices soaring. That spike has produced a 2 trillion Euro increase in gas and power spending—a hike in energy bills by 200% across Europe. Such an increase amounts to 20% of household disposable income, and that awful trend is almost certain to get worse. Russian gas pipeline deliveries via the three main routes to Europe have fallen by almost 90% in the last 12 months. In an early September speech Putin warned that

energy and food (especially grain) shipments to the West were now in further jeopardy. His rhetoric and actions underscore that Moscow is determined to play diplomatic and economic hardball in its dealings with the West and is quite capable of doing so.

Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, contends that the European Union has "shot itself in the lungs" by joining the U.S. crusade to coerce Russia with economic sanctions. If those measures are not reversed soon, he argues, they might well wreck Europe's economy and cause even more widespread suffering. Indeed, multiple signs now point toward a cold, dark winter for European populations and the EU's descent into a deep economic recession.

Blindly following Washington regarding policy toward Russia is costing the European people dearly, and it already is fueling a surge of resentment against the continent's current political leaders. This episode again underscores the need for the EU nations to develop their own security policies instead of relying on the United States to make the key decisions. Europe's interests overlap with America's, but they are far from being congruent. It is apparent that Europe will pay a much greater price than the United States for the current economic war against Russia. Europeans must take steps to ensure that Washington cannot lead them down a garden path to calamity ever again.

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