



Washington Keeps Alienating Its Policy Partners

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A top priority for the Biden administration when the Russia-Ukraine War erupted was to secure maximum international support for a strategy to penalize and isolate Moscow. It is clear that the strategy has failed outside of NATO and Washington's string-of-pearls military alliances in East

U.S. officials have not reacted well to the wary, quasi-neutral stance adopted by key powers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Instead, administration leaders (as well as key members of Congress) have become ever more insistent, angry, and even vengeful, thereby further alienating those countries. Washington's handling of relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), Saudi Arabia, and Turkey highlights the policy clumsiness.

The biggest blow to the administration's goal of gaining international support for sanctions and other forms of coercion against the Kremlin was the inability to gain the cooperation of China and India. Escalating pressure (and even implied threats) did not budge those governments. Indeed, the PRC's level of cooperation, including joint military exercises, with Moscow has increased. True, President Xi Jinping has admonished the Kremlin to cease making even vague threats about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. However, despite growing annoyance with Russian president Vladimir Putin's disruptive conduct, Beijing shows no signs of joining the U.S.-led sanctions regime.

Logically, the United States should have moved to put other quarrels it had with the PRC on the back burner if Washington wanted to gain greater cooperation on the Russia problem. Instead, the administration and its congressional allies have exacerbated bilateral tensions on multiple issues. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's provocative visit to Taiwan this summer was one incident. President Joe Biden's repeated statements that the United States has a commitment (indeed, an obligation) to come to Taiwan's defense if the island is attacked—even though the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act contains no such commitment—also riled bilateral relations. The United States has not even paused its rapid buildup of air and naval forces in the Western Pacific to help reduce tensions.

As if those measures weren't enough to alienate Beijing, the administration concluded in early October that it was an appropriate time to launch a salvo against China's economy by imposing sweeping tech restrictions. The new measure included a provision barring China from using semiconductor chips made with U.S. tools anywhere in the world. It constituted by far the harshest economic measure ever leveled against Beijing since the normalization of

diplomatic relations. A Bloomberg analysis described it as “a kneecapping of the Chinese tech industry, depriving it of the advanced chips—and the means of making them—vital for everything from smartphones to self-driving cars.”

It is not clear that these hostile steps were solely in response to the PRC’s refusal to join the anti-Russia coalition, since bilateral frictions had been rising for years. However, the annoyance with Beijing’s neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine War almost certainly was at least one factor. In any case, the timing was horrible, and reduced rather than increased the prospect that China might decide to tilt against Putin.

Washington’s handling of relations with Saudi Arabia regarding Riyadh’s policy toward Russia has been no more adept. In the summer of 2022, Biden personally pressed the Saudi government to increase oil production to ease the upward pressure on already sky-high energy prices that were disrupting the economies of NATO’s European members. (A collateral benefit of an increased oil flow from Saudi Arabia and other OPEC nations was the likelihood that step would help keep gasoline prices in the United States from spiking just before the midterm congressional elections.) Instead of increasing output, though, Riyadh and its OPEC partners decided to cut production by 10 percent in early October.

Both the administration and Riyadh’s critics in Congress were furious, with the Biden foreign policy team accusing Saudi Arabia of “aligning” with Russia. In mid-October, Biden warned that the Saudis would face “consequences” for defying Washington’s call for increased oil output. Some of the president’s allies in Congress proposed legislation to retaliate by terminating U.S. arms sales to the kingdom. Unlike the punitive measures imposed against China, where the mixture of motives was not entirely clear, the surge of anti-Saudi sentiment in both the White House and Congress was explicitly linked to the adverse impact that a production cut would have on the U.S.-led policy against Russia. “There must be consequences for fleecing the American people in order to support Putin’s unconscionable war,” Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA), one of the co-sponsors of the coercive legislation, said in a statement.

Washington’s deepest annoyance regarding a perceived partner’s betrayal has been directed against fellow NATO member Turkey. Ankara’s deviation from the policy Washington seeks amounts to outright apostasy, especially with respect to sanctions on Russian energy exports. Almost from the beginning, Turkey has given higher priority to ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible through negotiations rather than trying to coerce, weaken, and humiliate Russia. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly offered to play the role of mediator.

Erdogan has become increasingly outspoken in his criticism of the U.S.-NATO approach to dealing with Russia. In early September, he railed against Turkey’s fellow alliance members for engaging in repeated provocations toward Moscow. Conversely, he hailed and stated his intent to continue his country’s more “balanced” policy. One manifestation of the continuing flirtation with Moscow was the decision in early October to invite Russia to build a second nuclear plant in Turkey, in direct defiance of U.S. wishes.

Ankara also is not above profiting from the soaring energy prices caused by Western sanctions. Turkey has positioned itself to be a crucial player in energy matters, especially by acting as the

middleman in marketing Russia's oil exports—frequently selling them to fellow NATO members at a substantial markup. The Biden administration continues to ratchet up pressure on the Erdogan government to cease undermining NATO sanctions against Russia, with little apparent effect.

Most of the blame for the ongoing policy frustration lies at the feet of the administration itself. The president and his advisers failed to take the necessary steps during the weeks immediately before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine to make certain that key regional actors would be on board with a call from Washington to sanction and isolate Russia. The lack of support outside of the NATO bloc seemed to blindside U.S. officials.

Instead of subtly courting such important players as China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, the administration and its congressional allies have petulantly demanded that those countries comply with U.S. wishes. Administration leaders have not even been willing to place ongoing grievances with Beijing, Riyadh, and Ankara on the back burner to improve prospects for getting them to be more cooperative on the Russia issue. Instead, both the White House and congressional leaders have taken measures that exacerbated tensions with those governments. The process has been a textbook example of foreign policy incompetence.

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