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Washington's Failed Push For Anti-Russian Global Consensus

The Biden administration clearly overestimated the extent of international outrage at Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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Biden administration officials treat Russia as an international pariah and push the global community to unite behind Washington's leadership to compel the Kremlin to withdraw its forces from Ukraine. The administration's strategy has been just partially successful. Criticisms of Russia's actions are relatively easy to find among foreign leaders, but when it comes to outright condemnations—much less endorsements of NATO's position that the war was unprovoked and entirely Moscow's fault—governments around the world demur.

They are even less inclined to sign on to the U.S.-led campaign to impose extraordinarily severe sanctions on Russia. Indeed, outside of NATO and the string-of-pearls U.S. bilateral security alliances in East Asia, the support for sanctions is notable for its absence. That was true even during the first month of the war, and it has become even more pronounced since then.

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."

Signs of trouble surfaced almost immediately. On March 2, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly approved a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian military forces: 141 countries voted for the resolution, and as U.S. officials were fond of emphasizing, only five voted against.

However, a surprising 35 countries—including 17 African nations—opted to abstain, even though a favorable vote to placate the United States would have been the easy choice. The resolution was purely symbolic, since it did not obligate U.N. members to take any substantive action, yet a significant number of countries in Asia, the greater Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, opted to snub Washington. More than 20 percent

of the General Assembly's membership refused to embrace a purely feel-good measure the Biden administration emphatically wanted passed. From the outset, the U.S.-sponsored global coalition against Russia looked fragile and unenthusiastic. It has become more so with the passage of time.

African countries especially fail to see any advantage for themselves in supporting the West's policy. Although Washington insists that repelling Russia's aggression against Ukraine is essential to preserve the "rules based, liberal international order," governments and populations in Africa see matters differently. To them, the war looks more like a mundane power struggle between Russia and a Western client state. As one African scholar put it: "many in Africa and the rest of the Global South do not regard—and never have regarded—the liberal international order as particularly liberal or international. Nor do they consider it to be particularly orderly, considering how much their countries were turned into spheres of influence and arenas for geostrategic competition."

More tangible economic interests also push Africa toward neutrality. A June 3 *New York Times* analysis concluded succinctly: "A meeting on Friday between the head of the African Union and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia highlighted the acute needs each one hopes the other can fill: Africa needs food, and the Kremlin needs allies." Indeed, the head of the African Union, President Macky Sall of Senegal, has explicitly called for the lifting of sanctions on Russia.

Even portions of Latin America have balked at waging economic war against Russia. Most troubling for the U.S.-led anti-Russia strategy, both Brazil and Mexico—the region's two most important political and economic players—continue to dissent. Indeed, the tensions have broadened to negatively impact Washington's overall relations with those two governments. Mexico's president even refused to attend the Biden administration's much ballyhooed "Summit of the Americas" in June. It was an ostentatious snub.

It is especially ominous for U.S. objectives that both China and India have stayed on the sidelines with respect to the West's showdown with Russia. True, Xi Jinping's government has also resisted Moscow's calls for greater solidarity and tangible support. PRC leaders have instead sought to remain on the tightrope of trying to pursue a generally neutral course with a slight tilt toward Russia's position. But most important, both Beijing and New Delhi have remained firm in their refusal to impose economic sanctions on Russia.

The Biden administration has not reacted well to any country's attempt to maintain a neutral posture. That annoyance even has been directed at major powers such as China and India. U.S. officials have exerted increasingly insistent pressure on both governments to embrace the West's sanctions strategy. Some of Washington's statements have amounted to outright threats. On multipleoccasions, the administration warned India that there would be "consequences" for failing to impose sanctions on

Russia. The unsubtle message was that India itself could become a target for sanctions from the United States and its allies, if New Delhi failed to cooperate.

Despite the much more extensive bilateral economic links to the PRC, Washington has even threatened Beijing with sanctions if it supported Moscow's actions in Ukraine. Moreover, "supporting" increasingly became an implicit synonym for "failing to oppose." Beijing did not respond passively to such pressure. Instead, the PRC warned that it would impose retaliatory sanctions against the United States and its allies.

Washington's bullying behavior is not playing well internationally. For example, the Biden administration's threats to sanction China over Beijing's relations with Moscow immediately spooked Thailand, Indonesia, and other smaller powers in East Asia. However, the reaction was not one of capitulating to Washington's demands. Instead, the abrasive U.S. approach seemed to harden the resolve of those nations to remain neutral with respect to the Russia-Ukraine war. South Africa and other countries in the Global South also complained loudly about heavy-handed U.S. pressure, and refused to alter their positions.

The Biden administration clearly overestimated the extent of international outrage at Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Given the track record of multiple Western military actions against sovereign countries, including Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, it is hardly surprising that other governments might view the West's stance regarding Moscow's behavior as the epitome of self-serving hypocrisy. U.S. leaders also overestimated the extent of U.S. leverage to compel nations not in Washington's geopolitical orbit to participate in a punitive policy toward Russia. It should be a sobering experience, but the administration and the members of the U.S. foreign policy blob that populates it show no signs of learning anything worthwhile. Instead, U.S. arrogance and the inflated sense of Washington's power continues undiminished.

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