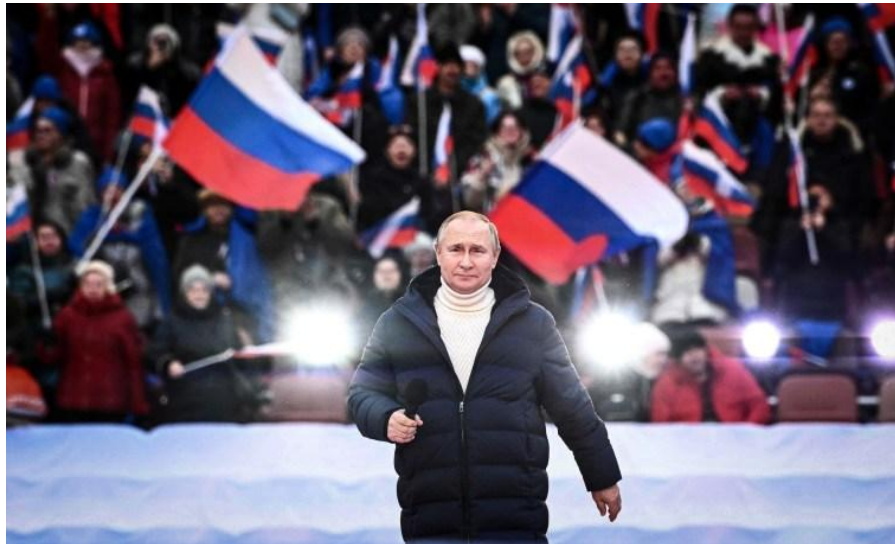


Oil, weapons and realpolitik: Why some countries want to stay on friendly terms with Russia

Dan De Luce

India relies on Russian-made weapons, Israel needs Russia's cooperation to strike inside Syria and Gulf Arab states look to Russia to help manage the oil market.



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a concert marking the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow on March 18, 2022. Sergei Guneyev / Pool via AFP - Getty Images

Despite outrage in Western capitals over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many other countries around the world — including some important U.S. allies and partners — have been reluctant to confront Russia or to support economic sanctions against Moscow, experts and former U.S. officials say.

A small number of countries have declared unqualified backing for Russia since its forces rolled into Ukraine, including regimes in Syria, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. But a longer list of governments, including China, have avoided using the word "invasion," abstained from U.N. votes castigating Russia or declined to take part in punishing sanctions on Russia's economy.

The ambivalent response from governments around the world reflects how Russia has been able to use its oil wealth, defense industry and historic ties to retain a degree of influence in foreign capitals. It remains unclear if countries that are straddling the fence can offer a valuable lifeline to Moscow, or whether these states can play a meaningful role mediating an eventual end to the conflict.

Russia is watching the response of other countries closely, including customers for its defense industry and fellow oil producers. But one government in particular may hold the key for Moscow — China. Experts say only Beijing has the economic heft and global power to help soften the blow of harsh economic sanctions introduced by the United States and the European Union, or to potentially persuade Moscow to pull back from its military offensive in Ukraine.

Here are some of the countries that are hedging their bets:

India

Russia supplies about 60 percent of the weapons and equipment for India's military, the cornerstone of a decades-long friendly relationship between Moscow and Delhi. Experts say that explains in part why India has used muted language in response to the war in Ukraine, avoiding sharp criticism of Russia and urging a diplomatic solution. India also avoided criticizing Russia after its seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

"I think Indian strategists calculate that they cannot afford to alienate Russia," said Lisa Curtis, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security think tank who served on the White House National Security Council from 2017 to 2021.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin prior to their delegation meeting at Hyderabad House, on Dec. 6, 2021, in New Delhi. Sanjeev Verma / Hindustan Times via Getty Images file.

India has tried to buy more military gear from the United States and other countries in recent years, but it remains dependent on Russia, Curtis said. Viewing both neighboring Pakistan and China as adversaries, India is increasingly concerned about Moscow's deepening ties with Beijing.

"This, I think, underscores why it would serve India's interest to try to do more to get this war to end," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Wilson Center think tank. "Not by coming out and condemning it publicly but more so by quietly trying to urge the Russians and Ukrainians, but especially the Russians, to wind down," he said.

In a move that will frustrate Washington, India's central bank is exploring a trade arrangement with Moscow that would use only Indian rupees and Russian rubles,

bypassing Western sanctions, according to the *Financial Times* and other media. India also plans to purchase three million barrels of oil from Russia at a discount.

Israel

Russia's attack on Ukraine has placed Israel, a staunch U.S. ally, in a delicate position. Initially cautious in its reaction, Israel has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in increasingly tough language, but so far has not joined with other democracies in imposing economic sanctions against Moscow.

Under Israeli law, sanctions can only be imposed on a country designated as an enemy state. Israel has also not promised to send any weapons to Ukraine, even though Israeli-made drones could be extremely helpful for Kyiv as it tries to fend off the Russian onslaught.

Israel, citing its friendly relations with both Moscow and Kyiv, has offered to play a role as mediator in the conflict. Since the war began, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and had several phone conversations with him as well as with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Israel has also sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Ever since Russia deployed forces to Syria to shore up the regime of Bashar Assad, Israel has forged an understanding with Moscow that allows Israeli forces to strike at Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon or other Iranian-backed militia in Syria, according to former U.S. officials.



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett attends a cabinet meeting at his office in Jerusalem, on March 14, 2022. Jack Guez / AFP - Getty Images.

“We have a kind of border with Russia,” Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said last month, shortly before the invasion. Russia is “the important force” in Syria, Lapid [said](#), and so Israel is in “a bit of a Baltic situation.”

He also said Russia and Ukraine have large Jewish communities, and that he has to be “more careful than any other foreign minister in the world.”

Once Putin sent Russian aircraft and other forces into Syria in 2015, “the Israelis took him very seriously as an arbiter,” said Eric Edelman, a former senior U.S. diplomat and defense official, now at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments think tank.

Amid questions about whether Russian oligarchs with property and ties to Israel might be able to evade Western sanctions in the country, Lapid vowed that “Israel will not be a route to bypass sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and other Western countries.”

Israeli officials, however, were quoted in Israeli media saying that the government did not have authority to stop an Israeli company from doing business with Russian firms.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have shied away from backing the Biden administration in its bid to isolate and punish Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, and the two regional powers have avoided criticizing Moscow since Russian forces began what Putin calls a “special military operation.”

The UAE abstained last month from voting on a U.N. Security Council draft resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And so far Gulf countries have not opted to increase oil production to control a rise in oil prices, despite requests from Washington and other Western governments.

The wealthy Persian Gulf monarchies see Russia as a crucial actor in a coalition of oil producers designed to manage the global oil market. In 2019, the Saudis and other oil powers invited Russia to form an expanded group known as “OPEC+,” to control output and ensure a stable, profitable oil market. The group was created to counter the effect of America’s boom in shale production.

The Gulf Arab states don’t want to jeopardize that arrangement over the war in Ukraine, and see Russia as an important “linchpin” for the oil producing coalition, said Ellen Wald, a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank and author of Saudi, Inc.

“These Gulf countries want to maintain the OPEC alliance with Russia because it makes OPEC more powerful as a market manager,” Wald said. “They’re looking beyond this Ukraine issue and they don’t want to blow up this good thing they have going.”

The Gulf Arab states, which host U.S. forces, have consistently supported the United States over decades, but their response to the war in Ukraine reflects how their interests are starting to diverge from Washington, experts said.

The 2018 murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi by a Saudi hit team has placed a permanent strain on U.S.-Saudi relations, and the Emiratis are frustrated that the Biden administration has not imposed tough sanctions on Iranian-backed Houthi forces after a series of attacks on the UAE.

The Gulf states also are wary of the Biden White House's efforts to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, fearing the restoration of the accord could bolster their arch-rivals in Tehran.

Turkey

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has had a contradictory relationship with Russia, with the two governments finding common ground in some areas even as they clash elsewhere.

Turkey, a member of NATO, voted for a U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia over its actions in Ukraine, but it has not slapped sanctions on Moscow or closed its airspace to Russian aircraft.

In Libya and Azerbaijan, Turkey has supported groups fighting Russian-backed forces. But Erdogan and Putin have forged a friendly relationship, and Turkey has bought Russian-made anti-aircraft S-400 missiles and cut energy deals with Moscow. Turkey also looks to Russia to help it maintain pressure on Kurdish groups in Syria, as Ankara fears the emergence of a Kurdish state on its border.

In Ukraine, the government in Kyiv has used Turkish-made drones to great effect against Russian armored convoys, though Ankara has not called attention to their weapons exports to Ukraine.



*Russia, Ukraine foreign ministers meet for high-level talks in Turkey
MARCH 10, 202206:27*

Turkey has labeled the Russian invasion a “war,” allowing it under the 1936 Montreux Convention to close the Bosphorus Strait — which links to the Black Sea — to warships. But the decision doesn't mean Russia's navy is cut off from sailing into the Black Sea.

As one of the littoral states on the Black Sea, Russia can claim the movement of ships through the area is to return to their home naval base. Turkey's action, however, could undermine Russia's ability to resupply its forces.

As it tries to balance between Russia, Ukraine and NATO, Ankara has emerged as a potential mediator, along with Israel, in efforts to find a negotiated settlement to the war. Erdogan has been offering to help with dialogue between Moscow and Kyiv since April last year, hosting Zelenskyy for talks and later traveling to the Russian city of Sochi in September to meet Putin.

Earlier this month, Turkey hosted the first face-to-face talks between Russian and Ukrainian officials in the southern city of Antalya, where the foreign ministers discussed a possible 24-hour ceasefire.

China

China's response to the war in Ukraine could shape the conflict's outcome and the larger clash between Moscow and the West. China portrays itself as neutral on the "crisis" in Ukraine, but its state media echoes Russian propaganda and it has endorsed Moscow's view that the war was caused by NATO's expansion since the end of the Cold War.

For years, ties between Russia and China have steadily improved, particularly since Xi Jinping came to power. The two powers share common ground in their hostility to the United States, to democracies more broadly and to the rule-based world order created by the U.S. and its European allies after World War II.

On the sidelines of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Xi and Putin declared in a joint statement that the partnership between their two countries had "no limits" and that there were no "no forbidden areas of cooperation."

"Fundamentally what we see is that two authoritarian powers, Russia and China, are operating together," Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's secretary-general, said on Feb. 15. Since U.S. and European governments imposed sanctions on Russia after the invasion, China's exports to Russia have surged, including electrical equipment, vehicles and machinery, while Moscow has sent China petroleum products and lumber.

But it's unclear whether China would be ready to send Russia military hardware to replenish spent stocks.

China says it has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine and has accused the United States of aggravating the conflict by sending weapons to Kyiv's government.

"Will the latest US assistance of weapons bring stability and security to Ukraine or cause more civilian casualties? Which do the civilians in Ukraine need more, food and sleeping bags or machine guns and mortar rounds?" foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters.



*Bonnie Glaser: 'China needs to think twice' about undermining Russian sanctions
MARCH 18, 202202:22*

The war has complicated China's ambitions in Europe, a key market in Beijing's long-term plans, and its effects on the global economy could have major fallout for China's economy, which was already sputtering before the Russian invasion.

Although India and other countries appear ready to continue to trade with Russia and to refrain from criticizing it publicly, only China has the power to throw Moscow a lifeline as sweeping Western sanctions squeeze its economy.

"It's a group that might help Russia here and there. But the big question is really China," said Barry Pavel, a former senior Pentagon official and now senior vice president at the Atlantic Council.

As it has in other cases, including with Iran or North Korea, China may decide to turn a blind eye to Western sanctions without explicitly defying them, according to Pavel. He calls the approach the North Korea "two-step," with China doing favors "behind the scenes to help your buddy."

Experts disagree how much China could ease the impact of the harsh financial sanctions that have caused the Russian ruble to plunge and prompted speculation the Russian banking sector could eventually collapse.

No matter how China responds, Russia's economy "is in for a ton of pain," Pavel said.

South Africa

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has blamed NATO for the war in Ukraine and said he would resist calls to condemn Russia.

South African political leaders retain loyalty to Moscow from the Cold War era, when the Soviet Union trained and armed anti-apartheid activists while the United States supported the apartheid regime for years.



Russian President Vladimir Putin greets South African President Cyril Ramaphosa during the welcoming ceremony at the Russia-Africa Summit in Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, Oct. 23, 2019. Mikhail Svetlov / Getty Images file.

South Africa was among two dozen African countries that declined to join a United Nations vote this month deploring Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Russia has cultivated ties across the continent through military cooperation agreements with no human rights conditions attached, and Russian mercenaries have been linked to conflicts in the Central African Republic and Mali.

"The majority of mankind (that are non-white) support Russia's stand in Ukraine," Lt. Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, said in a tweet.