

The Big Read Geopolitics

Putin, Ukraine and the revival of the west

The strength and unity of the response to Russia's invasion surprised the Kremlin but some have accused the west of hypocrisy

Gideon Rachman in Paris YESTERDAY

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Two photos taken during the Ukraine crisis seem to sum up the relative positions of Russia and the western alliance. The first is of Vladimir Putin at his now famous long table — his physical distance from visiting leaders symbolising Russia’s isolation. The second image is of Joe Biden in the middle of a group of Nato leaders — with the US president surrounded by friends and allies.

Amid all the horror of the war in Ukraine, some in the US and Europe have spotted a silver lining in the revival of the western alliance. Ivo Daalder, a former US ambassador to Nato, captured the new mood in a recent co-authored article, with James Lindsay, headlined: “Why Putin Underestimated the West.”

The speed, strength and unity of the western response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine surprised the Kremlin, as Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, has admitted. It may even have surprised western leaders.

Within a few days of the invasion, a large part of the assets of Russia’s central bank had been frozen. A [range of Russian financial institutions](#) and oligarchs were hit with sanctions. European airspace had been closed to Russian airlines. Tech exports to Russia were restricted. Russia had been kicked out of the football World Cup. The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany had been suspended and Berlin had announced a historic increase in military spending. And western countries had agreed to supply Ukraine with heavy weaponry — with the EU making its first ever move into direct military assistance.





Leaders of the G7 countries line up after meeting in Brussels in March. US and European allies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Australia, have joined in the sanctions effort against Russia © Henry Nicholls/Getty Images

These responses were not simply a one-off. New sanctions or seizures of Russian assets continue to be announced. The western alliance also seems set to expand with Finland and, possibly Sweden, set to apply to join Nato. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, justified partly as a response to Nato expansion — has actually provoked a further enlargement of Nato.

Previous international crises — such as the Iraq war or Russia’s attack on Georgia in 2008 — have either divided the western alliance or caught it off-guard. By contrast, as Margaret Macmillan, the eminent historian, points out, this time “the west seemed prepared and to have actually thought through how it would respond”.

The chaotic US and allied [withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) in the summer of 2021 fitted perfectly into the narratives, heavily promoted in Moscow and Beijing, of American isolationism and western decline. But the strength of the response over Ukraine, led by the US, has helped to challenge those ideas — and given heart to believers in the Atlantic alliance.





Afghans in Kabul scramble to flee in 2021. The chaotic allied withdrawal fitted the narratives of western decline, but the response over Ukraine has challenged that © Akhter Gulfam/EPA/Shutterstock

Norbert Röttgen, a German MP who until recently led the parliament’s foreign affairs committee, says: “The central importance of America to European security has been reasserted. Europeans are more aware of the importance of the American alliance. Americans are reminded of the importance of Europe.”

It has also become apparent that “the west”, as a geopolitical concept, is no longer defined by geography. [American allies in Asia](#), including Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Australia, have joined in the sanctions effort against Russia. So has Switzerland, a neutral country and important international financial centre. US officials felt more relaxed about placing sanctions on the Russian central bank, knowing that the world’s other big financial centres were acting in concert with Washington. Efforts by Russia and China to diversify their assets away from the dollar are much harder if the major alternative currencies — the euro, the yen, the pound and the Swiss franc — are also off limits.

But while there is undoubted satisfaction in Washington and Brussels at the strength and unity of the western response, even the optimists are keenly aware that western unity could be fragile and fleeting.





Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron in Moscow in February. Tensions over the EU's stance on Russia are rising, with the Polish prime minister criticising France's president for making numerous phone calls to Putin © Sputnik/AFP/Getty Images

For the moment, all eyes are on next Sunday's French presidential election. [Marine Le Pen](#), the candidate of the far-right Rassemblement National, is running President Emmanuel Macron close in the polls. Le Pen has a history of hostility towards the EU and Nato and remains an advocate of rapprochement with Russia. In a foreign policy speech in Paris this week, she argued that “equidistance” should be a central principle of French foreign policy — implying that France should not favour its relationship with the US over its relationship with Russia.

Looking further into the distance, many Europeans are watching Biden's sinking poll numbers with alarm. The [prospect of a return of Donald Trump](#) to the White House in 2024 is spooking some officials at Nato and the EU.

Even without Trump or Le Pen in power, [tensions are already rising](#) within the EU itself. Macron recently lashed out at Mateusz Morawiecki, calling him “a far-right anti-Semite who bans LGBT people”, following criticism from the Polish prime minister, of Macron's decision to make numerous phone calls to Putin.



Marine Le Pen of the far-right Rassemblement National, who has a history of hostility towards the EU and Nato, is just behind Emmanuel Macron in the French presidential race © Clement Mahoudeau/AFP/Getty Images



Some officials at Nato and the EU fear the prospect of a return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2024 could threaten western unity against Russia © Chris Seward/AP

These kinds of intra-European tensions could mount over the coming months, as the war in Ukraine drags on. Initial euphoria about the strength of western sanctions could give way to a sense of impotence and despair as Russia commits war crimes across Ukraine, while the west watches from the sidelines. Rising inflation in the west — in particular a surge in the cost of energy — could mean that voters' attention switches away from Ukraine and towards economic difficulties at home.

Le Pen is already making the cost of living the centrepiece of her campaign — and that is only set to climb across Europe. For example, British consumers, who have just seen a 50 per cent rise in their energy bills — are, on the current trajectory, likely to be hit with another 50 per cent rise in autumn. These economic woes are already leading to divisions over sanctions. Germany continues to resist pressure to immediately stop imports of Russian gas — arguing that a rapid curtailment could lead to surges in inflation and unemployment.

The indifferent south

It is also dawning on the west that the idea that the whole world is united in condemnation of Russian actions is demonstrably false. To be sure, there have been some significant diplomatic reverses for the Kremlin. The initial Russian invasion was

some significant diplomatic reverses for the Kremlin. The initial Russian invasion was condemned at the UN General Assembly by a vote of 141-4. On the other hand, there were many significant abstentions. Indeed, countries that failed to condemn Russia at the UN, including China and India, account for more than half the world's population.

India's response to the war in Ukraine is a particular concern, and a warning, for the west. Often hailed as the world's largest democracy, the Indians are crucial partners in America's plans to counter Xi Jinping's China. Washington has even gone to the length of relabelling the area, once referred to as the Asia-Pacific region, as the Indo-Pacific — a bow towards the geopolitical importance of India. Together with Australia, Japan and the US — the Indians form part of the Quad, a security grouping which China has denounced as part of an embryonic "Asian Nato".

But while Australia and Japan have joined "the west" in pushing back against Russia — India has conspicuously stood to one side. Russia's foreign minister Lavrov recently paid a friendly visit to Delhi and had a private meeting with Narendra Modi, India's prime minister. The least discomfiting explanation for India's neutrality is simple realpolitik: the Indians buy a lot of arms from Russia and their primary strategic worries are Pakistan and China — so they see no reason to have a row with Russia as well.



India's prime minister Narendra Modi. While other Indo-Pacific countries have joined 'the west' in pushing back against Russia, India has conspicuously stood to one side © AP



President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil was one of the last foreign leaders to visit Vladimir Putin in Moscow before the invasion and has stayed neutral on the war © Andressa Anholete/Getty Images

But there is also clearly some sentiment involved. India media commentary on the war is full of references to the country's longstanding friendship with Russia — and to the hypocrisy of the west, with everything from the British empire to the Iraq war, cited in evidence. Kapil Komireddi, an Indian commentator who is sharply critical of his own government's stance on Ukraine, also condemns the “intolerable sanctimony of the west”.

India is far from an isolated case. Brazil and South Africa also abstained in key UN votes on Ukraine. Two weeks after the Russian invasion, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa — regarded as a champion of the rule of law and democracy at home — tweeted his thanks to “His Excellency Vladimir Putin for taking my call today”. President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil was once a close ally of Trump — but now detests the Biden administration. He was one of the last foreign leaders to visit Putin in Moscow before the invasion and has stayed neutral on the war.

Even the west's favourite autocrats in the Gulf states have stood to one side in this conflict. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have also abstained in UN votes on Russia. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, nurturing [his own grievances](#) against the Biden administration, has pointedly resisted western entreaties to increase oil production, to offset the loss of energy supplies from Russia.



A bombed apartment building in Borodyanka, Ukraine. The speed, strength and unity of the western response to the invasion surprised the Kremlin, and even some western leaders © Vadim Ghirda/AP

All of these discordant notes underline that any initial impression that the whole world had united in outrage against Russia was clearly misleading. Instead there is an “axis of outrage” centred on the western alliance and an “axis of indifference” centred on the Global South.

Pascal Lamy, a former head of the World Trade Organization, thinks that the west should take this very seriously. He argues that “the China-Russia alliance is partly an alliance of narratives”. The common story told by Moscow and Beijing is one of western hypocrisy and double-dealing, Lamy says, and that narrative has many takers in the Global South.

Even prominent international civil servants, like WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, are calling out the west for alleged double standards. He questioned this week whether “the world really gives equal attention to black and white lives”, given the modest attention on emergencies in countries such as Ethiopia, Yemen and Afghanistan.

American and European resilience

These kinds of considerations should qualify any sense of western triumphalism

about efforts to isolate Russia. Nonetheless, it remains true that the west has had a good crisis. For Macmillan, one of the lessons is that “it’s premature to say that the US is in decline . . . the US still has tremendous assets and power.”

As the historian points out, there have been previous eras where American power and resilience was written down prematurely — after the Depression and after the Vietnam war. The EU has also had numerous obituary notices written for it — most recently during the Greek debt crisis and after Brexit. But the EU, like the US, is quite resilient. And when the EU and the US work together with Japan, the UK, Canada, South Korea and Australia — these advanced democracies still easily account for more than half the world economy.



Russia's footballers play in a World Cup qualifying match. Within a few days of the invasion of Ukraine, the country had been kicked out of the competition © Jure Makovec/AFP/Getty Images

Meanwhile, the west's adversaries are looking less formidable than they were — even a few months ago. The mystique of the Russian armed forces has been comprehensively punctured by the war in Ukraine. And China under Xi looks more troubled than for some years. Beijing's official response to the war in Ukraine has been evasive — as China watches its Russian ally flounder and plays for time. At home, Xi is also facing a growing crisis. His “zero Covid” policy — hailed repeatedly by the official Chinese media as proof of the superiority of the Beijing model of governance — is now in serious trouble, with Shanghai in a prolonged and

increasingly unsustainable lockdown.

Three years ago, Putin told the FT that the western liberal model was now a proven failure. Xi's mantra has been that the east is rising and the west is in decline. Both men may have spoken too soon.

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