

War in Ukraine

Gulf states' neutrality on Ukraine reflects deeper Russian ties

Long-term US allies UAE and Saudi Arabia want to preserve co-operation with Moscow on energy and geopolitical issues



Vladimir Putin, centre, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, right, in 2019. Russian ties to the UAE have strengthened while those with the US have cooled © Alexei Nikolsky/TASS/Getty

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A day before the UN Security Council voted on a US resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Washington reached out to one of its most important Arab partners as it sought to rally support against President Vladimir Putin.

The United Arab Emirates had taken a temporary seat on the council this year and US secretary of state Antony Blinken called his Emirati counterpart, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, to reiterate the "importance of building a strong international response to support Ukrainian" sovereignty.

But when it came to the vote on Friday, the UAE ignored Washington's pleas and instead joined China and India in abstaining in a public display of Abu Dhabi's frustrations with US policies.

For decades the Gulf's two powerhouses, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have marched to America's beat, but Friday's decision underlines how they are pursuing more independent foreign policies as they deepen relations with Washington's adversaries in Moscow and Beijing.

“We no longer need a green light from America or any other western capital to decide on our national interest,” said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, an Emirati political science professor. “We are not with or against — that is the position. If America is upset, they will just have to level with that.”

The response of most Gulf states, which for decades have viewed the US as the guarantor of their security, has been muted as they attempt to pursue a neutral stance to preserve co-operation with Moscow on geopolitical and energy issues, while deflecting western accusations that refusing to condemn Russia amounts to support for the invasion.

Anwar Gargash, a UAE presidential adviser, said on Sunday the Gulf state “believes that taking sides would only lead to more violence”. He insisted Abu Dhabi’s priority was to “encourage all parties to resort to diplomatic action and to negotiate to find a political solution”.

Emile Hokayem, a Middle East expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the UAE’s abstention “at a time of western consensus has surprised some western officials”. But he added that the UAE’s “hedging behaviour has been ongoing for some time”.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia believe successive US administrations have been disengaging from the Middle East. They have been privately expressing their disgruntlement with US policies since former president Barack Obama was perceived to have ignored the interests of long-term Arab partners during the 2011 popular uprisings and when he signed up to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

Abu Dhabi’s concerns came to the fore in December when it suspended talks with the Biden administration over the UAE’s bid to buy US-made F-35 jets, angered by Washington’s restrictions on their use. This year, it has chafed at what it considers the Biden administration’s tepid response to attacks on Abu Dhabi by Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen. The US has deployed additional military assets to the UAE, part of a Saudi-led coalition that has been fighting the Iran-allied Houthis since it intervened in Yemen’s civil war in 2015. But Abu Dhabi wants Washington to designate the Houthis a terrorist organisation and impose tougher sanctions on the Yemeni group.

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The Biden administration appears reluctant to do so as it holds indirect talks with Iran on the revival of the nuclear accord, and heeds warnings that such a move would exacerbate Yemen’s humanitarian crisis.

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President Joe Biden has also annoyed Riyadh by criticising human rights abuses and refusing to talk to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's day-to-day ruler.

In contrast, Putin was one of the few world leaders to embrace Prince Mohammed after the royal was widely blamed for the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents. The Russian president publicly high-fived the crown prince at a G20 meeting weeks later.

Saudi Arabia, which has not issued statements on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, also has shared energy interests with Moscow as they are the main players in Opec+, which Russia joined in 2016.

Despite oil prices soaring above \$100 a barrel, Riyadh has resisted US pressure to pump more oil, with analysts saying it believes raising supply would make little difference. In a phone call with French president Emmanuel Macron, Prince Mohammed said the kingdom was committed to Opec+, according to a Saudi statement on Monday.

Ali Shihabi, a Saudi commentator, said the US had "sent multiple signals and actions" that its alliance with the kingdom was no longer a relationship Riyadh could rely on.

"Hence Saudi leaders have decided that they have to build multiple alliances and relationships with other major powers, mainly China and Russia," he said.

He added that Riyadh had invested heavily in building ties with Moscow and regarded Opec+ as a strategic relationship critical to the "lifblood" of the kingdom's economy — oil.

"This is not something the kingdom will flush down the toilet now," he said. "Russia has proven that it remembers its friends and also its enemies and the Opec+ agreement signed by the kingdom is one the Saudi leadership will strictly adhere to. Western politicians have a short memory. Saudi leaders do not."

Saudi and Emirati officials still insist that the US is their primary foreign partner. Yet as the US has talked up its pivot to Asia, Moscow has been deepening its presence in the Middle East.

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Russia turned the tide of the Syrian civil war by intervening militarily in 2015 to back the Assad regime; it deployed mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group to Libya to fight alongside a UAE-backed Libyan warlord; and it has nourished political links with regional powers including Iran.

“Russia, like China and others, are trying to fill the vacuum left by America. and Russia is well positioned to play a bigger role,” said Abdulla. “They are winning. Putin has calculated it very well.”

But, advising caution, Hokayem said “western resolve and possibly success in Ukraine may change Emirati calculations, showing the limitations of Russian soft and hard power”.

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