

Outside the West, Putin is less isolated than you might think



By Anthony Faiola and Lesley Wroughton

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In India, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has refrained from denouncing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, describing it as a gripe between Moscow and NATO. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said his nation "will not take sides" in the conflict, even as he dismissed Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky as "a comedian." A senior South African official still calls Russia "a friend through and through."

From a perch in the West, it's easy to see a world standing against Russian President Vladimir Putin. As Russian forces lay brutal siege to Ukrainian cities, leaders in Washington and the capitals of Europe are slapping Moscow with sanction after sanction. In Western countries, Putin has come to be seen as a Bond villain caricature and antagonist to a heroic, beloved Zelensky. Even McDonald's suspended operations in Russia. Surely you're isolated if you can't buy a Big Mac.

There's no question Putin has dug himself, and his nation, into a dangerous hole. Russian propaganda and censorship have severed its people from reality. Slammed by sanctions and cut off from a massive part of the global financial system, the Russian economy is withering. This week, Western countries hit Moscow's vital energy sector. The ruble is turning to rubble.

Look deeper, though, and the suggestion that Putin is isolated may still be something of a Western bias — an assumption based on a definition of the "world" as places of privilege, largely the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan. Of the 193 members of the United Nations, 141 voted to condemn Moscow's unprovoked attack on its neighbor. But that majority vote doesn't tell the more nuanced story.

"There is a feeling [that] the level of support from a lot of non-Western countries for this resolution was quite thin," said Richard Gowan, U.N. director at the International Crisis Group.

Many countries in the developing world, including some of Russia's closest allies, are unsettled by Putin's breach of Ukrainian sovereignty. Yet the giants of the Global South — including India, Brazil and South Africa — are hedging their bets while China still publicly backs Putin. Even NATO-member Turkey is acting coy, moving to shut off the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to all warships, not just the Russians.

Just as Western onlookers often shrug at far-flung conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, some citizens in emerging economies are gazing at Ukraine and seeing themselves without a dog in this fight — and with compelling national interests for not alienating Russia. In a broad swath of the developing world, the Kremlin's talking points are filtering into mainstream news and social media. But even more measured assessments portray Ukraine as not the battle royal between good and evil being witnessed by the West, but a Machiavellian tug of war between Washington and Moscow.

We "should keep an equal distance from both imperial powers," wrote columnist Fuat Bol in Turkey's Hürriyet.

The dithering over Putin echoes the nonaligned movement during the Cold War, of countries that sought middle ground between dueling superpowers. But the gulf between the West and the Global South may also be worsening during the pandemic and the era of climate change, as developing nations grow increasingly resentful of the self-interested responses in the United States and Europe.

“There are a growing number of countries that are more willing to assert their independence in spite of the fact that they aspire to closer cooperation with the West and are even in need of Western support,” said Chris Landsberg, a professor of international relations at the University of Johannesburg. “They are willing to send the message that they don’t take kindly to the idea of being boxed in and forced to choose” sides.

Unwillingness to denounce Putin does not necessarily translate into determination to help him. Last week, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank suspended all business with Russia. New Development Bank, a multilateral lender set up by the BRICS countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — “in light of unfolding uncertainties and restrictions” put new transactions with Russia on hold.

Most importantly, the extent of China’s backing for Putin, whom Chinese leader Xi Jinping met with in Beijing nearly three weeks before the invasion, remains a wild card. Amid fallout that China surely did not want — a more assertive Japan, a splintering global economy — Xi’s support for a new world order alongside Moscow has turned into a complex balancing act.

But Beijing has at least sought to preserve a certain pro-Russian sentiment at home. On the Chinese social media site Weibo — where the phrase “Russian invasion” is banned — the Nation reported that uses of the hashtag “Putin” and “Emperor Putin” have surged alongside memes of Putin riding a bear.

India refused to back U.N. resolutions denouncing the invasion, nodding to a strategic relationship that dates back to the Cold War. New Delhi sees Moscow as a counterbalance to China, and more than 60 percent of India’s weaponry comes from Russia. India struck a \$5.43 billion deal with Moscow in 2018 for the S-400 missile system.

“Russia is one of the largest arms dealers in the world,” said Dan Runde, a foreign policy expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “The U.S. sells the Cadillacs of weapons, while Russia sells the Chevys.”

Under Modi, “India has responded to the invasion with the blunt realism of a rising, aspirational power that does not want to get caught between Russia and what Modi calls the ‘NATO group,’ ” the International Crisis Group said in a new report.

South Africa was one 17 African countries to abstain from a U.N. resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, bowing to historical ties between the African National Congress, which led that nation’s struggle against the White minority government, and the Soviet Union. Two of South Africa’s post-apartheid presidents, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, underwent military training in the Soviet Union.

On Monday, Zuma — in a statement issued through his foundation — called Putin “a man of peace.”

“Russia is our friend through and through,” Lindiwe Zulu, South Africa’s minister of social development who studied in Moscow during the apartheid years, told the New York Times. “We are not about to denounce that relationship that we have always had.”

“We can neither give up on Ukraine nor on Russia,” declared Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Meanwhile, the Turkish press and public have echoed the false Kremlin narrative of Ukraine as a den of neo-Nazis, and turned a cynical eye on Europe’s warm welcome for Ukrainian refugees, as opposed to Syrians and Afghans, countless numbers of whom were stopped from entering the European Union and forced to seek refuge in Turkey.

“The rulers of Ukraine have broken with their own history and have become puppets of NATO,” Ethem Sancak, a businessman and close ally of Erdogan, told the Russian press.

Wrote Asli Aydintasbas, a senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, in The Washington Post: “A sense of strategic ambiguity seems to be at the heart of Turkey’s balancing act with Russia. ... Turkey is unwilling to antagonize Putin — at least not without a firm offer from the West.”

War in Ukraine: What you need to know

The latest: President Zelensky condemned as an atrocity a Russian airstrike that tore through a maternity hospital in Mariupol on Wednesday, injuring at least 17. Meanwhile, in the U.S., House lawmakers approved new humanitarian, economic and military assistance to Ukraine worth approximately \$14 billion.

Oil exports: Russia is the world’s largest oil exporter, sending more than 7 million barrels of crude oil to countries around the world, including to Germany and other E.U. members.

The fight: Casualties are mounting in Ukraine — including civilians, while Moscow is facing allegations that it has used cluster and vacuum weapons. As many as 4,000 Russian soldiers may have died, according to a U.S. general.

Map: Russia’s assault on Ukraine has been extensive with strikes and attacks across the entire country.

The response: [Russia's war could be a global economic "game changer,"](#) with rising gas prices and shifting trade decisions suggesting change that will be felt for years. Meanwhile, in Russia, [online access has been significantly curtailed](#) by censors at home and businesses abroad.

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By [Anthony Faiola](#)

Anthony Faiola is a columnist on The Post's foreign desk, where he is interim anchor of the Today's WorldView newsletter and column. He has stepped away from his role as South America/Caribbean bureau chief through April 2022. Since joining the paper in 1994, he has served as bureau chief in Berlin, London, Tokyo, Buenos Aires and New York. [Twitter](#)

