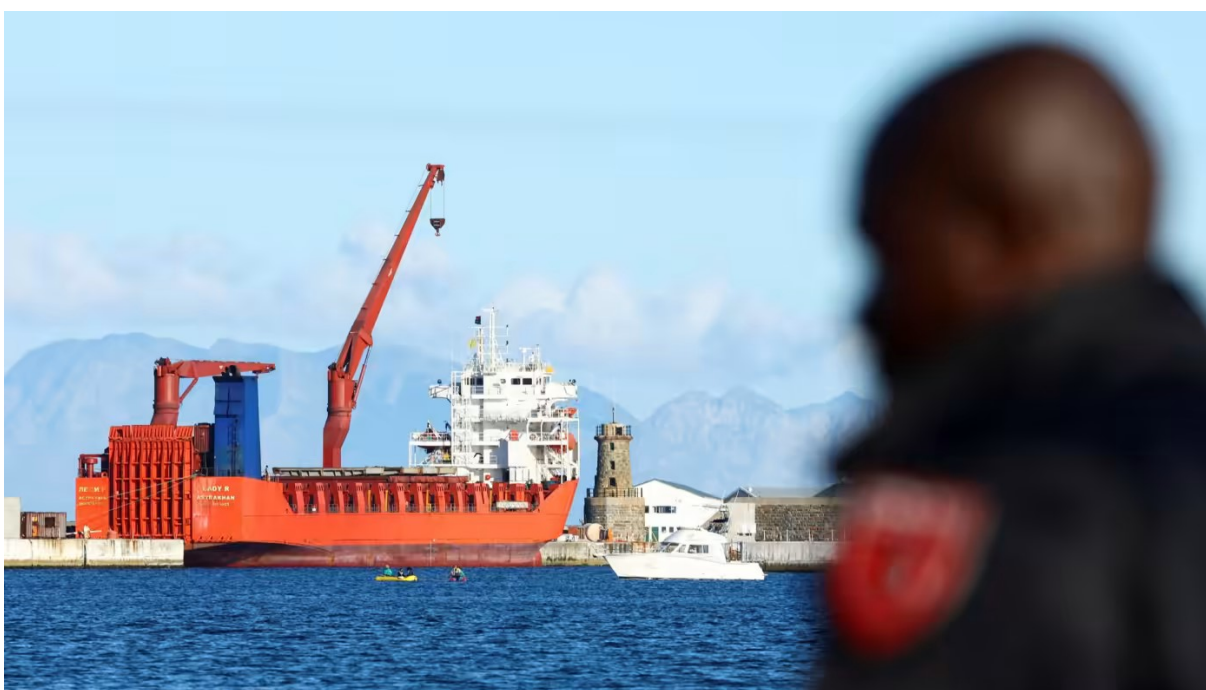


War in Ukraine

US accuses South Africa of supplying arms to Russia

Claim worsens foreign policy crisis for Cyril Ramaphosa's government over ties to Kremlin



The Lady R vessel docks at Simon's Town near Cape Town in December 2022 © Esa Alexander/Reuters

Joseph Cotterill in Johannesburg 7 HOURS AGO

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The US has accused South Africa of supplying arms to Russia in a covert naval operation, escalating a foreign policy crisis for President Cyril Ramaphosa over the country's ties to the Kremlin and position on the Ukraine war.

Reuben Brigety, US ambassador to [South Africa](#), told local media on Thursday that the US believed weapons and ammunition were loaded on to the Lady R, a Russian vessel under sanctions that docked at Simon's Town naval dockyard near Cape Town in December.

“Among the things we noted was the docking of the cargo ship . . . which we are confident uploaded weapons and ammunition on to that vessel in Simon's Town as it made its way back to Russia,” he said, in comments reported by South Africa's News24.

Brigety also said that senior US officials had “profound concerns” about the incident, which “does not suggest to us the actions of a non-aligned country”.

The state department said the US had raised the issue directly with South African officials. Spokesman Vedant Patel said: “The US has serious concerns about the

officials. Spokesman Veehane Patel said. “The US has serious concerns about the docking of a sanctioned Russian cargo vessel at a South African naval port in December of last year.”

“We have been quite clear and have not parsed words about any country taking steps to support Russia’s illegal and brutal war in Ukraine,” he added, “and we will continue to engage with partners and countries on this topic.”

Ramaphosa’s office responded by saying an independent inquiry would be set up under a retired judge to look into the allegations. It also said talks had been held between South African and US officials over the vessel and an agreement to allow investigations to continue.

“It is therefore disappointing that the US ambassador has adopted a counter-productive public position that undermines the understanding reached on the matter and the very positive and constructive engagements between the two delegations,” Ramaphosa’s office said in a statement.

US anger highlights the mounting tensions between the west and countries that have refused to condemn [Russia over the war](#) or join sanctions efforts.

Like South Africa, India has continued to regard Russia as a friendly nation and western diplomats have struggled to convince developing nations across Africa and Asia to back Ukraine. Brigtety also criticised a resolution from the ruling African National Congress, which said “the US provoked the war with Russia over Ukraine”.

John Steenhuisen, leader of South Africa’s main opposition Democratic Alliance, called for an urgent parliamentary debate on South Africa’s involvement with Russia, and said that the US claim “brings into question the transparency” of the ANC.

The rand extended losses to hit a record low on Friday, dropping to R19.46 to the US dollar, passing its previous record low of 19.35 in April 2020.

South Africa has said it is non-aligned in the war, but Ramaphosa’s government is under pressure over signs it is favouring Russia, for example by holding joint naval exercises this year.

Ramaphosa has also extended an invitation for Russian president Vladimir Putin to attend a Brics leaders’ summit in Johannesburg in August — a move that has backfired on Pretoria after the International Criminal Court indicted Putin for war crimes. South Africa, a member of the ICC, would be legally obliged to arrest Putin if he travels there.

Sydney Mufamadi, Ramaphosa's national security adviser, recently visited the US to explain South Africa's stance and to try to preserve trade links.

The scandal over the Lady R is likely to overshadow these efforts.

The Lady R, which is owned by Transmorflot, a company placed under sanctions by the US last year, appeared to switch off its transponder as it made the stop in Cape Town after a voyage down the west coast of Africa.

South Africa's defence minister said that, after the ship left port, it had delivered a consignment for the country's defence forces, but provided no details on what the vessel may have picked up in Cape Town.

The South African government in January officially denied it had approved any arms sales from South Africa to Russia since Moscow began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Additional reporting by Mary McDougall in London

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