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## Is Russian foreign policy succeeding?

Vladimir Putin's aim of disrupting the US-led international order is closely tied to his war of expansion in Ukraine



At a news conference this week Russia's president Vladimir Putin gloated over Western aid to Ukraine running out © via Reuters

**Tony Barber** DECEMBER 16 2023

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A “remarkable strategic own goal by us” — that’s how [Jake Sullivan](#), President Joe Biden’s national security adviser, this week described the risk of a lapse in US funding for Ukraine.

If US and European support for Ukraine fizzled out over the next 12 months, Vladimir Putin would presumably be the winner. Does this mean that Russian foreign policy is succeeding? You can find me at [tony.barber@ft.com](mailto:tony.barber@ft.com).

### **Striking a blow at the west**

Regarding the war in Ukraine, we should keep in mind that Putin has more than one aim. In his newly translated book *Ukraine: The Forging of a Nation* (which I shall review soon for the FT), the historian Yaroslav Hrytsak writes that, after Russia’s invasion and partial dismemberment of Georgia in 2008, Putin adopted the following strategy towards Ukraine:

“The Russian-sneaking east, along with Crimea and the entire Black Sea coast, was to

The Russian speaking east, along with Crimea and the entire Black Sea coast, was to be annexed to Russia. Western Ukraine, as a territory with strong anti-Russian sentiments, could go wherever it wanted to go, to hell with it. The rest of Ukraine would be reduced to a small vassal agrarian state with a puppet government in Kyiv.”

But Putin has the wider ambition of rearranging the international order by inflicting serious, even fatal, blows on US leadership and by sowing disunity in Nato and the EU.

At present, each of Putin’s objectives remains out of reach. Although Russia occupies [about 17.5 per cent](#) of Ukraine’s territory, it hasn’t succeeded in annihilating the nation’s independence, identity and desire to integrate with the west.

Meanwhile, Nato has expanded since Russia’s February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with Finland joining the alliance and Sweden on the verge of following. Moreover, Europe has dramatically reduced its reliance on Russian energy.

True, there are spoilers and waverers in the EU camp. Hungarian premier Viktor Orbán’s Russophile sympathies and hostility to Ukraine meant that, at this week’s EU summit in Brussels, “Putin [was] also sitting at the summit table” — [as Jens Geier, a German Social Democrat, put it](#).

At the summit, Orbán [vetoed a €50bn EU financial aid package for Ukraine](#), but that’s not a disaster — there are other ways for the bloc’s other 26 governments to continue funding Kyiv.

On the other hand, Orbán’s decision not to block the opening of EU accession talks for Ukraine isn’t really a cause for celebration. Hungary has the power (and, under Orbán’s leadership, will undoubtedly exercise it) to obstruct and drag out the process once it starts next year.

Still, on balance, Ukraine is holding out. Western support for Kyiv, though politically contentious and running thin in material terms, hasn’t collapsed. Will that last?

### **Implications of a Ukrainian defeat**

“Putin is banking on the United States failing to deliver for Ukraine,” [Biden said on Tuesday](#). “We must, we must, we must prove him wrong.”

In recent months, the view has spread among US and European war analysts that Putin is gaining the upper hand in Ukraine. Kyiv’s counteroffensive has stalled; US aid for Ukraine is tangled up in domestic politics; and the Europeans are battling to maintain a united front.

At a press conference and phone-in this week, [Putin said](#): “Ukraine produces almost nothing today, everything is coming from the west, but the free stuff is going to run out some day, and it seems it already is.”

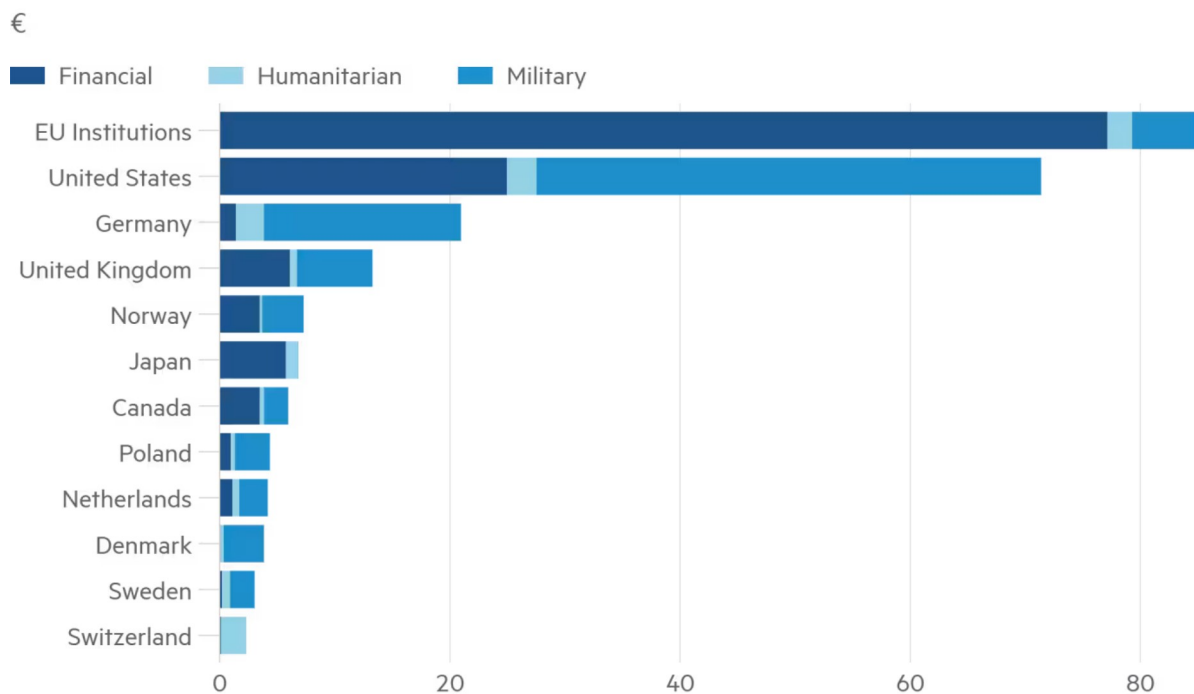
Here is Jacob Kirkegaard, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Brussels, [quoted in the FT](#):

“Ukraine is . . . no longer regarded as this issue of national security, of paramount importance for the EU, Nato or the United States. Because if that was the case, people wouldn’t be playing politics with it . . .

“If you’re Vladimir Putin, you’re saying, well, my strategic decision to try to hold on longer than the west is working.”

According to an [FT-Michigan Ross poll](#), 48 per cent of American voters — and 65 per cent of Republicans — think the US is spending too much on military and financial aid for Ukraine.

### Government support for Ukraine



Source: Kiel Institute  
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It is all too easy to imagine that, if Donald Trump were to win next November’s US presidential contest and the Republicans made gains in Congress, that would result in sharply reduced American support for Ukraine.

Such a prospect accounts for commentaries such as [this one](#) by the editorial board of

... a paper ... [this link](#) ... the Washington-based Center for European Policy Analysis.

The CEPA board contends that independent Ukraine would fall prey to Russia; Putin would revel in global prestige; Europe would splinter apart, with some countries seeking deals with Moscow; and “the US [would go] from being the leader of a globe-spanning web of alliances, with a dominant position in international rule-based organisations, to being vulnerable even on its own continent”.

Anne Applebaum, [writing in The Atlantic](#), warns that a second Trump term in the White House would cause the US to abandon Nato.

However, from a constitutional viewpoint, it is unclear if a president has the authority to withdraw the US from an international treaty, like that which created Nato, without Senate consent.

Significantly, when senators voted on Wednesday to pass the annual National Defense Authorization Act, they [included a provision](#) that a president cannot pull the US out of Nato without congressional approval.

Perhaps, then, even a Trump second term might not advance Russia’s objective of wrecking Nato.

### **Russian economy’s strengths and weaknesses**

A successful Russian foreign policy requires a resilient Russian economy. Is the economy buckling under the war effort?

According to an analysis by the [US Treasury department](#), the economy is 5 per cent smaller now than it would have been if Putin hadn’t launched the 2022 invasion.

Moreover, some Russian companies are feeling the pressure, [as outlined in The Bell](#), an indispensable online resource for studying economic conditions in Russia:

“In its November financial stability review, the central bank concluded that most export-oriented Russian companies faced declining profitability, and worsening debt burdens.

“ ‘The main reasons are the decline in export revenues and incomplete replacement of supplies from Europe with deliveries to Asia,’ the report said.”

However, I don’t get the impression that the economy is near breaking point.

In particular, with regard to western sanctions on Russian energy, Putin has some

reason to be satisfied. As [this FT report](#) explains, Russian oil flows into Europe have slowed to a trickle, but millions of barrels are shipped every day to buyers in India, China and Turkey.

### **Russia's lopsided ties with China**

Any discussion of Russia's economy and foreign policy must take into account China. The two states are closely aligned in their opposition to the US-led international order and have stepped up military co-operation, including [joint naval exercises](#).





Russia and China have this year conducted joint naval exercises in the Arabian Sea (above) and the Sea of Japan © Russia Defense Ministry Press Service/AP

In [this article](#) for the Asia Society Policy Institute, Philipp Ivanov writes:

“The war in Ukraine has simultaneously accelerated and disrupted the China-Russia relationship. It has deepened Russia’s economic dependence on China [and] increased the power asymmetry between the two countries . . .

“China and Russia may have reached the peak of their partnership. But at the moment, the benefits of the relationship to both far outweigh the risks.”

For those of you who read German, I recommend [this in-depth study](#) of Russian-Chinese economic ties by Janis Kluge for the Berlin-based Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik research unit.

Kluge’s conclusions include:

1. Although bilateral trade has boomed since February 2022, Chinese investments in Russia have shrunk.
2. Russian fossil fuel exports to China are the backbone of the economic relationship.
3. Russian-Chinese co-operation in the IT sector has sharply diminished, because Chinese companies fear they may suffer US secondary sanctions.

All in all, Russian foreign policy is gaining some benefits from the close relationship with China, but at the risk of longer-term costs.

## **Russia and the wider world**

Beyond the US, Europe and their allies, most countries disapprove of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, as seen in [UN General Assembly votes](#) since early 2022.

However, the Israel-Hamas war has set back US diplomacy in much of the world. And many states in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East see some advantage in cultivating ties with Moscow as a way of maximising their weight in a disrupted international order.

[Putin's visits this month](#) to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are cases in point. (Neither country has ratified the statute governing the International Criminal Court, which has indicted Putin for alleged war crimes.)

A more limited Russian success was the [decision](#) in August of the Brics quintet (Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa) to invite six new members to join the club — Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Such a diverse group might look like an alternative to the US-led global order. But it is riddled with internal differences and by no means aligned with Russia on everything.

Finally, Russia's achievements in forging closer ties with [Iran](#) and North Korea — especially valuable in the war effort — must be set against its more strained relationships with former Soviet republics such as [Armenia](#) and the countries of central Asia.

In conclusion, Russian foreign policy is scoring some successes, but not across the board. In 2024, much will depend on the US election campaign and its impact on western support for Ukraine.

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### Tony's picks of the week

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