The Continuing Isolation of Russia? But Wait…

By Ted Snider
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In his State of the Union address, President Biden announced that Russia was "isolated from the world more than [it] ever has been." He said that "We are choking off Russia's access to technology that will sap its economic strength and weaken its military for years to come."

But the facts on the ground are less certain than Biden's words.

Oil

In an attempt to relieve world markets from the pain and pressure caused by sanctions on Russian oil, Biden went to Saudi Arabia as a supplicant seeking oil. The Saudis gratefully accepted everything Biden brought them and then, laughing, escorted him out of their house. The Saudis did increase their oil production: by a drop. The 100,000 barrels per day increase, "equivalent to 86 seconds of global oil demand" was described by analysts "as an insult to U.S. President Joe Biden."

Biden asked for help isolating Russia; Saudi Arabia seemingly sided with Russia.

What's equally problematic for the isolation of Russia is that Saudi Arabia has actually more than doubled its imports of Russian oil, importing 647,000 tons compared to 320,000 tons the same time last year. And Saudi Arabia and China are discussing paying for Saudi oil in yuans as well as US dollars.

China and India have done the same. *The New York Times* reports that "In May, China's imports of Russian oil rose 28 percent from the previous month, hitting a record high and helping Russia overtake Saudi Arabia as China's largest supplier, according to Chinese statistics." China is now importing 1.98 million barrels a day of Russian oil: a 55% increase over this time last year. The *Times* says that "India, which once purchased little

Russian oil, is now bringing in more than 760,000 barrels a day." That level of important, which has increased to 819,000 barrels a day, now makes Russia the second largest supplier of crude oil to India, overtaking Saudi Arabia. China and India alone, *The Times* reports, have balanced Western sanctions on Russia by increasing imports by about the same amount as the West has decreased them.

Exports

And it is not just that countries are increasingly importing Russian oil. They are also increasingly exporting goods to Russia.

According to analysis of a sample of 39 countries that accounted for 72% of Russian imports prior to the war, as the sanctions kicked in, exports to Russia dropped by 57%. But, since April, that has started to reverse. By June, exports were nearly back to pre-war levels, going back up by 47%. Most of that recovery was attributable to countries, including European countries, who signed up for sanctions.

And the trade trend is continuing. Chinese exports to Russia in July went up by 35% over June, lifting them above prewar levels. Like China, Turkey is currently exporting more to Russia – 40% more – than they were before the war.

And Turkey is doing more than sending goods to Russia. Turkey is increasingly engaging in trade and tourism with Russia. Imports of Russian oil account for almost half of Turkey's energy requirements. This month, Erdogan and Putin met, agreeing to increase energy, economic and other ties. And Russia is helping Turkey build its first nuclear power plant.

Friends

Russia also seems to be far from friendless. Much of the world has declined to join the US led sanctions. BRICS is an important Russia and China led international organization that aims to balance US hegemony. Members also include India, Brazil and South Africa. But far from being ostracized and contained, BRICS seems to be building. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirate, Argentina and Iran are all seeking membership. In May, Indonesia – who also invited Putin to the G20 summit they were hosting in defiance of US pressure – was welcomed as a guest to a BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting for the first time, as were the foreign ministers of several other countries, including Kazakhstan, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and Thailand. And with Brazil's elections coming up in October, and Lula da Silva leading in the polls by 12%, Brazil seems poised to put the BRIC back in RIC, correcting a lapse that has partially occurred during the unsteady Bolsonaro years.

The other crucial Russia-China led organization that shares the aim of balancing US hegemony is also gaining in popularity. Iran has been accepted into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), officially becoming a full member in April 2023. In September, 2021, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar were admitted to the SCO as a dialogue partner. Bahrain and the Maldives have also acquired dialogue partner status, and Azerbaijan and Armenia are now included as observers. The UAE wants to be next.

Much of Latin America and Africa have refused to join the sanctions on Russia. The US recently felt the need to scold Africa and warn them away from violating US led sanctions even if they haven't joined the sanction regime. It seems they don't get the choice. In early August, the US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told African countries that, although they "can buy Russian agricultural products, including fertilizer and wheat . . . if a country decides to engage with Russia, where there are sanctions, then they are breaking those sanctions." What happens if they break sanctions? "They stand the chance of having actions taken against them."

Biden's claim that Russia is more isolated from the world than it has ever been seems to be increasingly questionable. From oil sales to imports to countries staying out of sanctions and growing friendships, Russia may not be as isolated as Biden boasts.

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Ted Snider has a graduate degree in philosophy and writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.

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