

Russian RTF Short Paper

Sanctions on Russia when China is Involved

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27 April 22

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Global sanctions on Russia are meant to apply economic pressure long enough to force them to stop their invasion of Ukraine. Russia survived sanctions before following its invasion of Crimea. New sanctions on Russia are meant to impose even greater costs on their economy. Still, their improved relationship with China will offset any further pressure from the West. I will argue that Russia's supply chain issues due to Western sanctions will be survivable if they maintain a working relationship with China.

Russia is no stranger to sanctions imposed by Western nations, and they have found ways to overcome economic challenges during those times. It is crucial to compare sanctions against Russia pre and post-Crimea and sanctions concerning the current invasion of Ukraine. Economic sanctions are a diplomatic tool used against a foreign government to get them to do something they don't want to do or pressure them not to do something they want to do.¹ Economic sanctions are generally the most successful type that can be levied on a country because they can restrict its access to international markets.² Western sanctions on Russia were pretty limited in scope before the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and they focused more on denying the Soviet Union the capability to expand communist ideology.³

Economic sanctions on Russia took a turn after they invaded and successfully annexed Crimea. Post-Crimea sanctions on Russia, imposed by Western nations, included restricting Russia's access to foreign lending and denying them specific oil drilling capabilities.⁴ Initially, these sanctions seemed to be effective, but the timing of a drop in global oil prices hid their true effect. Once oil prices rose, Russia's largest export started to pay economic dividends, countering any sanctions Western countries could impose. The tricky question to answer is: do economic sanctions work against a country like Russia?

In 2022, Russia invaded the entirety of Ukraine, and Western sanctions were swifter and more economically damaging when compared to 2014. Western nations imposed even more extensive bans on oil, dual-use goods that could be used to support their military, and a complete shutdown on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.⁵ Russia's supply lines are more economically strained than before, but it only seems that way. The most significant change since Russia's last invasion is their improved relationship with China.

China is an economic powerhouse, and it is one of the few economic relationships Russia has left. China's hatred for Western sanctions and a shared Russian distrust of the United States makes them the best partner Russia could have if they wanted to accept the risk of invading Ukraine. China's shared border with Russia improves this relationship because geography makes future maritime blockades ineffective. In February 2022, China stated that it plans to expand Russian oil shipments to China to support its giant export manufacturing sector.⁶ China's Belt and Road Initiative primed the economic playing field between the countries, and it will improve relations as the project grows. The Belt and Road Initiative is a vast network of railways, highways, and streamlined border crossings that expand Chinese economic influence within Asia.⁷ Russia's access to Chinese goods is leveraged by its ability to sell oil to one of the only countries willing to buy it.

In conclusion, Russia's economic relationship with China enhances its ability to counter Western sanctions. China's Belt and Road Initiative manufacturing is supported by Russian oil, so both countries need to maintain an economic relationship to survive. Russia's ability to survive economically during its invasion of Ukraine is yet to be seen, but having a Chinese partner increases their odds. Russia found ways to overcome previous sanctions, and it is easy to speculate that it will survive this round.

Notes

¹ Edward Fishman, “Even Smarter Sanctions: How to Fight in the Era of Economic Warfare,” *Foreign Affairs*, no. November/December 2017 (n.d.): 102–10.

² *Ibid*, 108.

³ Andries S. Brandsma, and A. J. Hughes Hallett. 1984. “Do Economic Sanctions Against the Soviet Union Make Sense?” *Interfaces* 14 (4): 53–68. doi:10.1287/inte.14.4.53.

⁴ Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

⁵ “What Sanctions Are Being Imposed on Russia over Ukraine Invasion?” BBC News. BBC, April 11, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60125659>.

⁶ Ralph Jennings. “What China Can and Cannot Do for Russia amid Sanctions.” VOA. What China Can and Cannot Do for Russia Amid Sanctions, March 10, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/what-china-can-and-cannot-do-for-russia-amid-sanctions-/6477623.html>.

⁷ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride. “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.