

## Dueling Summits Show the Need to Enlist Arab Support on Ukraine

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Brief Analysis

**Key Middle East actors tend to distrust the U.S. narrative about the war and conclude they can reap better economic benefits from Russia, so Washington should do more to get them off the sidelines.**

Two competing international gatherings took place this month: a Russian-hosted BRICS meeting in Nizhny Novgorod and a Ukraine peace summit in Lucerne, Switzerland. Alternative visions of the world order stood in the backdrop of these dueling events. Moscow wants to replace the U.S.-led liberal international order with a multipolar world, while the West wants to preserve the existing model. During his [opening remarks \(https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2024/06/10/brics-foreign-ministers-meet-in-russia/\)](https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2024/06/10/brics-foreign-ministers-meet-in-russia/) in Nizhny Novgorod, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov highlighted the growing role of the BRICS alliance—founded by Brazil, Russia, India, and China and later joined by South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates—in creating this new world order. In contrast, the Swiss summit—organized in coordination with Kyiv but without Russia's participation—aimed to build broader global support for Ukraine's vision of peace. Moscow [dismissed \(https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/kremlin-derides-outcome-of-ukraine-talks-held-without-russia/80939192\)](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/kremlin-derides-outcome-of-ukraine-talks-held-without-russia/80939192) the event as “futile.”

The meetings also represented a [battle for support from “global south” countries \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-summit-another-chance-counter-russia-south\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-summit-another-chance-counter-russia-south) in the Middle East and Africa. Many of these governments have declined to join Western efforts to isolate Russia during the Ukraine war; in fact, some have given Moscow an outlet to keep its economy afloat amid Western pressure, leaving President Vladimir Putin with little reason to change his cost-benefit calculus, halt the war, or seek a genuine peace settlement. Unfortunately, the outcome of the dueling summits suggests that most Arab partners are not contemplating any meaningful policy adjustments as the war surges on.

### What Happened at the Meetings?

BRICS is a Russian creation—Moscow [spurred \(http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/eng/files/41d452b13d9c2624d228.pdf\)](http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/eng/files/41d452b13d9c2624d228.pdf) its initial formation in 2009 and assumed chairmanship of the organization earlier this year. The June 10-11 summit was the first gathering since BRICS expanded from five members to nine in January. The event proceedings included Lavrov's remarks decrying the West's perceived international dominance and its use of sanctions to “influence the choice of development models.” Afterward, twenty-two foreign ministers signed a [joint statement \(https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37860/joint-statement-of-the-brics-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-international-relations\)](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37860/joint-statement-of-the-brics-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-international-relations) focusing on de-dollarization, cooperation on a digital economy, and “comprehensive reform” of the UN General Assembly and Security Council.

Meanwhile, the June 15-16 summit in Switzerland was perhaps Ukraine's most ambitious effort yet to rally global support for its vision of peace, with over 100 nations and organizations attending. Russia actively worked to undermine the event—the Swiss government [reported \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/switzerland-says-90-states-organizations-signed-up-ukraine-summit-2024-06-10/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/switzerland-says-90-states-organizations-signed-up-ukraine-summit-2024-06-10/) an increase in cyberattacks and disinformation in the run-up to the summit. In the end, eighty-three countries signed a joint communique that called for preserving Ukraine's territorial integrity as the basis for a peace settlement while touching on other issues such as nuclear safety, food security, and prisoner exchanges. President Volodymyr Zelensky hailed the summit for making the “first steps toward peace.”

Still, the majority of the communique's signatories were Western countries, which also sent higher-level representatives to the event. Several key powers from the global south attended but did not sign—most notably India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, all of whom have important trade relationships with Moscow. Among other factors, Russia's absence and the ongoing Gaza crisis likely convinced key Middle Eastern states to either not sign the communique or skip the summit entirely. Turkey attended and signed, but Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan noted that the summit would have been more “[result-oriented \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/ukraine-peace-summit-would-be-more-result-oriented-with-russias-participation-turkish-foreign-minister/3251122\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/ukraine-peace-summit-would-be-more-result-oriented-with-russias-participation-turkish-foreign-minister/3251122)” if Russia were present. After the communique was publicly released, Iraq, Jordan, and Rwanda [reportedly \(https://kyivindependent.com/ukraines-peace-summit-failed-to-engage-the-global-south-what-can-ukraine-do-to-expand-its-coalition/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/ukraines-peace-summit-failed-to-engage-the-global-south-what-can-ukraine-do-to-expand-its-coalition/) withdrew their signatures. Egypt focused on the BRICS meeting instead, as did China.

### No Real Saudi or Emirati Shift on Ukraine

The global role of the Gulf states—especially leading energy producers Saudi Arabia and the UAE—has only grown in importance since Russia invaded Ukraine. Saudi and Emirati state companies have [taken advantage \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-u-a-e-scoop-up-russian-oil-products-at-steep-discounts-d327a2ee\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-u-a-e-scoop-up-russian-oil-products-at-steep-discounts-d327a2ee) of the crisis by buying large amounts of Russian petroleum products at discount prices, despite U.S. objections that such purchases bolster Moscow and undermine Western sanctions. In addition, Putin traveled to both countries last December, further highlighting their willingness to court ties with the Kremlin.

Accordingly, Zelensky made a special push to ensure Saudi participation in the Swiss summit. Initial reports suggested Riyadh would not send a delegation, but Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan wound up attending after Zelensky made a [last-minute visit \(https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-visits-saudi-arabia/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-visits-saudi-arabia/) to Riyadh on June 12. While in Lucerne, Prince Faisal noted [that Riyadh had leveraged its “positive relations” with both Ukraine and Russia. \(https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-updates-world-leaders-attend-swiss-peace-summit/live-69369361#liveblog-post-69375112\)](https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-updates-world-leaders-attend-swiss-peace-summit/live-69369361#liveblog-post-69375112)

Indeed, the kingdom has sought to position itself as a mediator between Moscow and Kyiv at various times during the war, from [facilitating a major prisoner exchange \(https://kyivindependent.com/azovstal-defenders-commanding-officers-return-to-ukraine-with-zelensky/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/azovstal-defenders-commanding-officers-return-to-ukraine-with-zelensky/) in September 2022 to providing over \$400 million in [humanitarian assistance \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/2469586/saudi-arabia\)](https://www.arabnews.com/node/2469586/saudi-arabia) to Ukraine and hosting an international peace summit in August 2023. At the same time, however, the Saudis have been indirectly undermining Western sanctions by cooperating with Russia on oil issues—not just purchasing its petroleum products as described above, but also coordinating [production cuts \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/06/business/oil-price-goldman-sachs/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/06/business/oil-price-goldman-sachs/index.html) that have kept oil prices (and, by extension, Russia's war budget) afloat. At the Swiss event, Riyadh noted that Russian participation in future summits would require a “difficult compromise,” implying that Ukraine would have to make greater concessions than it currently

envisions.

The UAE's wartime balancing act has leaned even more toward Moscow. On one hand, Abu Dhabi [announced \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/uae-stance-on-ukraine-war-reflects-strong-alliance-with-russia\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/uae-stance-on-ukraine-war-reflects-strong-alliance-with-russia) early in the crisis that it would provide \$5 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine in response to a UN appeal, and it has [voted \(https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/saudi-arabia-votes-favor-unga-resolution-calling-russia-withdraw-ukraine#:~:text=Publications-.Saudi%20Arabia%20Votes%20in%20Favor%20of%20UNGA%20Resolution,Russia%20to%20Withdraw%20from%20Ukraine&text=The%20Kingdom%20of%20Saudi%20Arabia%20in%20favor%20of%20several%20UN%20resolutions%20regarding%20Russia's%20invasion\)](https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/saudi-arabia-votes-favor-unga-resolution-calling-russia-withdraw-ukraine#:~:text=Publications-.Saudi%20Arabia%20Votes%20in%20Favor%20of%20UNGA%20Resolution,Russia%20to%20Withdraw%20from%20Ukraine&text=The%20Kingdom%20of%20Saudi%20Arabia%20in%20favor%20of%20several%20UN%20resolutions%20regarding%20Russia's%20invasion) in favor of several UN resolutions regarding Russia's invasion. Most recently, it brokered an [exchange \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uae-says-it-succeeded-mediating-an-exchange-180-prisoners-war-between-russia-2024-06-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uae-says-it-succeeded-mediating-an-exchange-180-prisoners-war-between-russia-2024-06-25/) of 180 prisoners of war between Ukraine and Russia. On the other hand, it has been careful not to condemn Moscow directly, and it joined the BRICS in January despite the ongoing international campaign to pressure Russia and end the war.

Perhaps most important, the UAE has become Russia's largest trading partner in the Arab world. Bilateral trade was growing steadily before the war and continued that trajectory afterward, reaching \$9 billion in 2022, the [majority of which \(https://tass.com/economy/1578771\)](https://tass.com/economy/1578771) was Russian exports. The two countries [reportedly \(https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/gcc/russia-uae-trade-volume-to-hit-10bln-by-end-of-2024-ijwzvfxa\)](https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/gcc/russia-uae-trade-volume-to-hit-10bln-by-end-of-2024-ijwzvfxa) aim to hit \$10 billion by the end of 2024.

Western governments are particularly concerned about reports that some of this Emirati trade includes sanctioned dual-use items such as computer chips and electronics, which Russia could use in the war. Weeks before the Swiss summit, a U.S. delegation visited the UAE to [press officials \(https://www.reuters.com/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-2024-05-01/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-2024-05-01/) about the country's trade ties with Russia, highlighting the fact that certain companies have been evading sanctions.

## Policy Implications

Asking Arab partners to help isolate Russia has had little success so far. Yet Washington can still do more to show them that Moscow's vision for a new world order is a losing one, and that their fears about taking firmer action are exaggerated. One way to do so is by showing the limits of what the BRICS can accomplish, demonstrating that a transparent global trade system backed by the United States will generate more wealth for them than an oligarchic model led by Russia.

As for the Ukraine war, global south governments have been pushing their preference for a peace process in which both combatants are involved rather than a Kyiv-led process. This push seems rooted in three perceptions: that the United States has been unreliable and hypocritical in its relationships with Middle East partners, that they can derive genuine benefits from Moscow, and that Russia will remain a permanent fixture of international relations no matter how the war ends. More broadly, the global south is simply not buying the Western narrative about the war.

The Swiss summit did lay the groundwork for potential Russian participation in future peace talks. Zelensky [reportedly \(https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/06/16/zelenskyy-considers-saudi-arabia-for-next-global-peace-summit/\)](https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/06/16/zelenskyy-considers-saudi-arabia-for-next-global-peace-summit/) considers Saudi Arabia as a prime candidate to host the next summit, highlighting the kingdom's importance for Ukraine. If Riyadh agrees to host, the United States would have ample opportunity to shape the next talks and engage regional countries on key concerns about Russia.

As for the terms of future talks, Russia should at minimum be expected to accept the principle of Ukrainian territorial integrity, even if only rhetorically at first. But actually reaching a successful diplomatic settlement will require changing Putin's cost-benefit calculus. If substantive talks take place before he is pushed into a losing position, he will have leverage to negotiate concessions that give Russia time and resources to rebuild its military and attack Ukraine again. Ultimately, a premature peace settlement would be of little use if it allows Russia to keep threatening Europe, global security, and the liberal world order in the long term. As this month's summits show, the fight to shift Putin's calculus is not limited to the battlefield, so Washington should marshal its diplomatic energies accordingly.

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