



The Global South and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine inspired a unity among Western democracies not seen since the first Gulf War. However, Western expectations of global unified condemnation and action against Russia were dashed by the response of the Global South. Far from endorsing the Western position, over 40 member states consistently abstained or voted against resolutions proposed in the United Nations General Assembly that sought to condemn Russian actions. In April 2022, in the wake of overwhelming evidence of human rights violations, 50 members voted against expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council. These included many African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries who were adamant that, irrespective of who started it and how it was conducted, the most important response should be to bring the conflict to an immediate end. What is behind the seeming indifference and even hostility in the Global South to the Western position on Russia?

This paper will review and assess how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been seen through the lens of the Global South. It will examine how Global South countries viewed the Western response to Russia's invasion; ensuing debates over non-alignment generated by Russia's invasion amongst Global South countries; and, how the Russia-Ukraine war has reignited discussion on reform the multilateral system.

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine inspired a unity among Western democracies not seen since the first Gulf War. Indeed, it was the expectation that this egregious violation of sovereign territory would galvanise the world to a wholesale condemnation of Russian aggression and, with that, support for a battery of legal, economic and military measures designed to turn back the tide in Ukraine. Led by a revitalised transatlantic alliance, an unprecedented array of sanctions barred businesses from commercial activity with Russia, while Western states did whatever they could to support Ukraine. Ukrainian refugees found shelter all across Europe, while the governments provided significant military resources and training to the Ukrainian troops.

The West's unity was compounded by the nature of the Russian invasion. Finding Ukraine less passive than expected led to a burgeoning catalogue of military failure, with Moscow resorting to indiscriminate bombings of civilian targets while permitting (if not encouraging) human rights abuses by its forces, all of which sparked outrage in the West and shook the confidence of Moscow and its allies. Putin's inevitable threat of nuclear force raised the stakes even higher.

However, Western expectations of global unified condemnation and action against the Russian invasion were dashed by the response of the Global South. No Gulf War-style support was forthcoming from this quarter, counter to presumptions in Washington, Brussels and London. Far from endorsing the Western position, over 40 member states of the United Nations (UN) consistently abstained or voted against resolutions proposed in the UN General Assembly that sought to condemn Russian actions.¹ In April 2022, in the wake of overwhelming evidence of human rights violations, 50 members voted against expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council. These included many African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries, who were adamant that irrespective of who started it and how it was conducted, the most important response should be to bring the conflict to an immediate end. Its position was echoed by the BRICS grouping, which increasingly presents itself as a challenger to the G7 industrialised countries for global leadership. And even those countries which did support condemnation of Moscow's invasion were reluctant to impose sanctions against Russia, making the action toothless.

I THE GLOBAL SOUTH DEFIANT

What is behind the seeming indifference and even hostility in the Global South to the Western position on Russia? The arguments put forward by leaders from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America can be clustered into three categories. The first is exasperation at Western hypocrisy towards violations of sovereignty, the second is the neglect and damage done by the war to the global development agenda and the third centres on the escalation of Russia's 'special operation' to the apparent brink of nuclear war with the West.

Concurrently, something that gets little to no airplay in the West is the fact that the Russian invasion has ignited a broader debate within the Global South as to what it means to be non-aligned in the contemporary context. There is widespread recognition that the form of non-alignment adopted by developing countries during the bipolar Cold War and institutionalised through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) does not resonate with the emerging multipolar system. Moreover, despite the protestations of leading emerging powers that they both identify as and are representative of the Global South, middle and small states are under no illusions as to the impact that power asymmetries with China or India have on global initiatives, not to mention on their own national aspirations.

Finally, the crisis in liberal international institutions has set the stage to resume pushing for reform of the UN system by China and the Global South. The dysfunctionality of the UN is embodied in the fact that there are persistent violations of the UN Charter by the Security Council's Permanent members, despite their role being to preserve international peace and stability, and this has undermined faith in the multilateral system. A new round of initiatives is underway through multilateral and plurilateral organisations that aim to reform the institutions of global governance. Should its declared ambitions be realised, it will produce, a more representative, legitimate and effective multilateral system.

This paper will review and assess how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been seen through the lens of the Global South. It will first examine how Global South countries viewed the

¹ The vote tally in first UNGA resolution to condemn the invasion was 141 for condemnation to five against, with 47 absences or abstentions.

Western response to the Russian invasion in the UN – focusing on the key issues of sovereignty, development and nuclear threats. Second, it will look at the debates generated by Russia's invasion within the Global South over non-alignment – a traditional policy approach to great power competition. Third, it will investigate how the Russia-Ukraine war has reignited the impetus to reform the multilateral system amongst Global South countries and, concurrently, how this feeds into the Russian-Chinese declaration of a 'New Era in International Politics'.

Before embarking, however, on this analysis, it would be important to say a few things about the terminology being used in this paper. While once an obscure phrase, 'Global South' is a term that has become common currency in academic and advocacy circles, especially among those arguing for economic and political concerns on an international stage, even to the point of being utilised by Western leaders.² Loosely employed to cover developing countries and emerging powers who share the historical experience of Western colonialism and imperialism, and a set of shared post-colonial challenges around nation-building and development, Global South geography spans Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the oceanic island states [2]. It no longer exhibits the uniformity in material power (or its absence) that was true in the first decades of the Cold War and it continues to be divided along nationalist, ideological, sectarian and other indicators of difference. At the same time, these divisions have not prevented countries from coming to some common policy positions. For instance, most support values such as sovereignty, development rights and international peace, in line with the core principles of the UN Charter. Although, much like Western states, such positions are not always reflected in the actions of Global South states.

Its greatest significance in international politics is as an organising principle for these countries in multilateral settings. In these settings, coalition politics between regionally based groupings and like-minded members drives policy formulation and the voting process. The most prominent of the Global South coalitions is the G77, established in 1964 (and now with 182 members), which was the instigator of the UN Conference on Trade and Development. It is one of the foundational groupings of the Global South in the UN, and while its fortunes have waxed and waned over time, like the NAM, it continues to serve as a collective voice for developing countries [3]. In this respect, the platform of the UN – especially the UN General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Human Rights Council – is the arena where the Global South primarily puts forward its collective position on issues.

The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was felt in the Global South in three distinct ways: (i) as a great power challenge to their interests; (ii) in generating a debate on non-alignment policy that was traditionally applied to great power competition and (iii) renewing questions as to the viability of an international system which is increasingly paralysed by great power competition.

II GLOBAL SOUTH REACTIONS TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERVENTION

Violations of sovereignty are characteristic of the post-Cold War era, as is patterns of Western indifference, as well as committal of, such violations. The long road from Western intervention in Iraq in 2003 to Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2022 – which passes through breaches of sovereignty in Libya, Syria and Yemen amongst other places – emphasises the disinterest and inertia of Western capitals. Moreover, the tepid response of Western governments' reaction to Russia's invasion and occupation of Crimea and the eastern littoral of Ukraine in 2014 paved the way for other states to also prefer inaction. Western states may have eventually imposed sanctions after Russia conducted a faux-referendum to affirm popular support for its occupation and annexation of the region, but they did so on one hand while propping up Russia's economy on the other. For instance, the EU continued with Nord Stream 2 pipeline construction, pumping Russian natural gas into Germany, a policy emblematic of the EU's unwillingness to sacrifice domestic needs to support core principles of international law [4, 5].

² Emmanuel Macron speaks frequently about the Global South, for example at the Munich Security Conference in 2023 where he said 'I am struck by how we have lost the trust of the global South' [1].

In considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa even suggested that the 'war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region [6].' Brazilian President Lula da Silva echoed this assessment, stating that 'Zelensky is as responsible as Putin for the war [1].' This is a view articulated by many governments in the Global South and finds considerable support on social media in countries as varied as India, Turkey and Malaysia [7, 8, 9].

Finally, as David Miliband points out, Western protestations of the violation of rule of law sound hollow against the catalogue of violations of the same principles by the United States (US) in particular. America has continued to fail to ratify the Statue of Rome, a failure which eased the way for Russia which withdrew from the treaty in 2016 and China, which refused outright to sign up to the treaty China [1]. Western states seem unable to practise what they preach.³

DEVELOPMENT AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

While the war goes on, to the Global South it remains a 'European war, far away'. The same sorts of arguments heard time and again when conflict breaks out in Africa, that the Western public would not support intervention in a country so geographically remote from North America and Europe, were played out in the Global South.

However, this does not mean that the Global South does not feel the impact of the conflict. First, there is the sharp rise in energy and food prices, led by the uncertainty around vital Russian grain and fertilizer shipments and second, there is the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia, and their consequent restrictions on commercial exchanges with Russian firms [11]. According to an IMF report published in March 2022, the energy price spike corresponded with a 30% rise in global wheat prices [12]. The negotiation of a deal between Kiev and Moscow, brokered by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was a welcome step in easing the immediate concerns about food security, but it is still subject to periodic review and inflationary pressures remain a grave threat to domestic stability in many developing countries. Regarding sanctions on Russian firms, the weaponization of the US dollar has enabled the West to impose costs that hurt developing economies as well as the Russian economy [13]. It is here that the prospect of securing support for sanctions against Russia is inhibited by the Global South's economic needs in the Global South, yet this receives only limited attention amongst Western leaders. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in response to African concerns of the sanctions impact, 'There are many stories that are a distraction from Russia's war in Ukraine – we shouldn't accept that [11].'

The key point here is that the perspective on the Russian invasion held by the Global South places greater focus on its disruptive effect on their economies and the consequent need to restore stability, rather than concern with the territorial and human rights violations. The immediacy of the painful economic spill over of conflict translated into a position that supported a cessation of the war, even if that – as some in the West argued – would play into the hands of Putin.

THREATS OF NUCLEAR WAR

Russia's unexpected failure to sweep aside the Zelensky government in a few short weeks put on display the sub-standard condition of its military. Putin's willingness to brandish the threat of nuclear weapons – not once but many times over the course of the conflict – to coerce and divide the transatlantic alliance over the question of support for Ukraine set off alarm bells across the world [14]. Coupled to this was the dangerous game that was played with the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power facility in eastern Ukraine, where Russian troops had occupied the site early on and put Ukrainian plant managers under their control. The proximity of the facility to ongoing conflict contributed to fears of a nuclear accident on a scale greater than Chernobyl.

This loosening of norms of conduct on nuclear weapons by one of the UN Security Council's Permanent five (P5) has come at a time when the battery of arms control treaties, that guided superpower behaviour for decades, have either run out and are not being renewed [15, 16]. During debates in the UN Security Council, representatives from Ghana and Brazil spoke to

³ For more on this debate, see Lawson and Zarakol [10].

the fears in the Global South that nuclear disarmament had ‘gone into reverse since 2020 [15]. Moreover, regimes in North Korea and Iran have demonstrated that with sufficient determination and investment, the technical obstacles to becoming a nuclear state can be overcome. All of this raises the possibility that a set of regional nuclear arms races in areas like Asia and the Middle East could be in the making.

III NON-ALIGNMENT IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

For the Global South, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the accompanying Western pressure to support countermeasures like sanctions generated debates over non-alignment. This has been the traditional policy approach to great power competition since the bipolar Cold War era. The conditions of US-led unipolarity, which prevailed from the Cold War’s aftermath until 2017, began to evolve towards multipolarity with its impact on the distribution of power across the international system. However, the rise of US-China competition and its manifestation in everything from trade to technology is beginning to bring pressure to bear on the Global South to choose a side. Russia’s invasion brings the threat to the liberal international system and the abuses of its principles by the P5 under the spotlight. The default policy of non-alignment looked out of date in this evolving context.

Alongside the evolution of the international system from bipolar to multipolar is a deliberate re-positioning of emerging powers away from non alignment over time. While the bipolar conflict between the US and the Soviet Union inspired Nehru and others to adopt non-alignment from either superpower, the post-Cold War era marked a reconsideration of non-alignment that emphasised a search for ‘strategic autonomy’ in foreign policy. For example, China while espousing the ‘Five Principles of Peace Co-existence’ derived from the Bandung Conference as pillars of its foreign policy continues to maintain a distance from traditional Global South organisations like the G77 – the formulation being ‘G77 + China’ – as a signifier of its special leadership status within the Global South. India, though long associated with the Nehruvian non-alignment policy and formally adhering to the same five principles nonetheless has formally adopted a foreign policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ [17, 18]. Indonesia, which leaned towards the US under the Suharto regime’s long reign, has effectively rediscovered non-alignment with the advent of democracy and even sponsored two major international conferences aimed at reinvigorating the ‘Bandung Spirit’ [19]. Brazil too has adopted a policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ as the basis of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War [20]. Even the European Union, undisputedly a key part of the Western alliance system and obviously not an emerging power, characterises its foreign policy aspirations as one of seeking greater strategic autonomy (presumably from the unnamed US).

This repurposing of non-alignment from its inherently defensive connotations – that is, neither signing up as a partner in the Western alliance system nor deliberately supporting an alternative to the liberal international system spawned by Western governments, seems to be the approach being taken by some countries of the Global South. Seeking to capture this evolving phenomenon, former Chilean ambassador, Jorge Heine and Carlos Ominami have characterised this new approach as ‘active non-alignment’.

Active Non-Alignment (ANA) calls on Latin American governments to not accept *a priori* the positions of any of the Great Powers in conflict. They must act, instead, in defense of their own national interest, without giving in to pressures from hegemonic powers. The term ‘active’ refers to a foreign policy in constant search of opportunities in a changing world, evaluating each of them on their merits. It recognizes the historical roots of the policy of Non-Alignment but adapts it to the 21st century [21].

Active non-alignment in this respect involves taking a policy position that may cut across the interests of great powers in the service of Global South countries’ national interests. It is transactional in content, not embracing the values-framed ideologies characteristic of the Cold War, and aims at the accumulation of greater political space for action, i.e., strategic autonomy. And it is suited to a multipolar system where power is distributed more readily across the system. For IR theorists, active non-alignment constitutes neo-realism’s ‘balancing’ and ‘hedging’ strategies though more rooted in a collective action approach honed through participation in international organisations.

The unequal distribution of power across international institutions is a longstanding issue for the Global South. In the wake of great power abuses of the UN Security Council producing systemic instability, countries of the Global South are joining like-minded multilateralists to re-examine how this ongoing crisis can inspire a new wave of reform. At the same time, many of these countries are also looking beyond the liberal international system for a means of addressing what they see as its structural deficiencies and glaring abuses of power which threaten Global South interests.

Permanent members of the UN Security Council continue to be the object of other members states' ire. The violations of sovereignty by Russia have precedents of course amongst the US in Iraq, China in the South China Sea and Britain and France in Libya. The recent passage of a non-binding resolution requiring permanent members of the Security Council to justify their use of the veto by permanent members of the Security Council points again to the resentment and concerns across the UN General Assembly as to the power of the P5 [22, 23].

Even more than the P5's violation of the UN Charter, however, is the more immediate and destabilising impact that US-led sanctions campaign is having on the economies of many countries in the Global South. What this has demonstrated unequivocally is that US power resources have a depth and breadth not fully understood by many in the Global South up till this point. Though Washington's ramping up of financial sanctions against Iran, back in 2014, provided a clear case of the reach of US financial power, even that did not have the level of international impact of the current round of sanctions against Russia.

All of this has reopened the debate on the pervasive use of the US dollar as the default currency in international trade, with Global South countries focusing not only on the cost of conducting trade in dollar but also the denomination of loans in dollars. The use of the dollar results in loan packages whose value is affected by the strength of the US currency and, consequently, contributes to unsustainable debt on their books [24, 25].

Amongst the initiatives operating outside the liberal international institutions against the hegemony of the US dollar is the plurilateral BRICS grouping. Led by China, BRICS countries are accelerating their own initiative to de-dollarise the global economy. The BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB) is already engaged in a range of initiatives from RMB currency swaps to provisions for short term liquidity pressures [26]. The intense interest amongst Global South nations in involving themselves in these initiatives can be seen in the uptick in RMB trade in a number of Asian, African, Middle Eastern and Latin American economies in recent years. And perhaps the most vivid expression of Global South interest is the submission of applications to join BRICS by over forty countries in the past few months.

V CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA IN THE MAKING?

During the G7 Summit held in the United Kingdom in June 2021, the Chinese embassy issued a telling statement:

The days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone. We always believe that countries, big or small, strong or weak, poor or rich, are equals, and that world affairs should be handled through consultation by all countries [27].

This stinging critique of Western presumptions of global leadership in the service of their interests has been galvanised by the West's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It undergirds the renewed to overhaul the liberal international system either from within or without. It is this vision of a new world order, a 'New Era of Global Development', that coheres most closely with the Bandung principles and promises to deliver global equity in governance and development and is attracting the countries of the Global South.

At the same time, the perpetual critique of the UN system by the majority of states, however valid, does carry with it the seeds of another turn in the system. Should the West see liberal internationalism as no longer worth fighting for then the rebirth of a world where Thucydides' realist logic of the rule by the most powerful will surely eclipse those very interests of many small and middle states in the Global South.

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