

LESSONS FROM UKRAINE: WHILE THE WEST CONSOLIDATES, THE REST OF THE WORLD IS MOVING IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION

On the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we are witnessing a split screen reaction to the events that unfolded beginning on February 24, 2022. While we have seen a united NATO and a united "West" and have heard repeated calls to ensure that the states calling out Russia's violations of international law and norms, providing aid and materiel, and supporting sanctions remain united, a significant part of the world has a very different view. In short, a conflict that represents the largest military assault on a sovereign country in Europe since World War II and that has witnessed the intentional targeting of a civilian population on a massive scale and untold human rights abuses on the ground, the deaths of tens of thousands and the displacement of a few million, the upending of the post-Cold War geopolitical order and internal debates about whether and, if so, how to escalate short of triggering a superpower conflict, is being interpreted very differently beyond the West.

The split screen has been evident for much of the past 12 months. As correspondent Liz Sly noted in her [article](#) this past week in the Washington Post ("A global divide on the Ukraine war is deepening"), while Western policymakers are quick to note that 141 out of 193 UN member states voted last March in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to condemn Russia (the "math"),¹ only 35 countries² have imposed sanctions and fewer are providing lethal aid. She cites an [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) survey that shows that an estimated two thirds of the world's population lives in states that refrained from condemning Russia (half living in states that are neutral and half living in states that have supported Russia or whose official declarations echo Russia's narratives). This week's UNGA vote calling on Russia to withdraw (141 voted in favor of a resolution, with seven voting against, 32 abstentions and 13 that did not vote) underscores that a year of atrocities in a conflict that has had global ramifications has failed to diminish overall the number of countries that, at best, are unwilling to take a stand against Russia and, at worse, are sympathetic to Russia.³

¹ Five member states voted against, 35 abstained and 12 did not vote. Of the 54 countries in Africa, 16 abstained, eight did not vote and one voted against the resolution. A second resolution in March reiterating demands that Russia withdraw and expressing grave concern over atrocities passed with 140 voting in favor, five against, 38 abstentions and 10 not voting.

In October, a resolution condemning Russia's attempts to annex four regions of Ukraine was supported by 143 member states – 35 member states abstained, four (Belarus, North Korea, Syria and Nicaragua) plus Russia voted against and 10 did not vote. Of the 54 African countries, 34 voted in favor, 17 abstained and three did not vote.

² The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, Japan, the member states of the European Union and South Korea. (See [Atlantic Council Russia Sanctions Database](#).) In addition, Sweden and Finland are seeking to join NATO. Admittedly, the countries supporting Ukraine represent around 70% of global GDP.

³ Last April, only days after news of murder, rape, torture and other human rights abuses in Bucha surfaced, 93 member states voted in favor, 58 member states abstained, 24 voted

Those states abstaining/not voting are not necessarily historical allies of Russia (or the Soviet Union) like Iran and Syria, but include South Africa, which in a clear message to the West is holding joint military exercises with Russia and China (codenamed Mosi II – smoke in Tswana, the first exercise having been held last November),⁴ and India, whose trade in the past year with Russia has jumped four-fold and whose military has depended for years on significant supplies of Russian weapons. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in recent weeks undertook his third tour of Africa in eight months, ahead of the Second Russia-Africa Economic Forum scheduled for July.⁵ Admittedly, the presence of Wagner mercenaries in Mali, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso (*see* my previous briefing note, available [here](#)) may explain the current world outlook in the highly volatile Sahel region, but plenty other states do not have that vulnerability.

While, in the face of the Russian invasion, consolidation in the West has accelerated at a pace and to an extent very few could have imagined a year ago, that consolidation is occurring at time when the rest of the world appears to be marching to a different drummer or set of drummers. Perhaps, then, we must consider a new dynamic, and that dynamic raises multiple questions. Foremost among them are whether, at a time when the West views condemnation of Russia as essential to the survival of the global world order, we are moving to a new world order, and is that world order a bipolar one (led by the US and by China), or are we moving to a more fragmented, multipolar world?

A Different Perception

I start with what might prompt a different take on the global world order. For a moment, consider what the Global South⁶ has witnessed since 9/11. An invasion of Afghanistan, an invasion of Iraq, the collapse of order in Libya and the global war on terror. Where was the collective outrage over Ethiopia? Why were refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea treated differently from refugees from Ukraine? Expand the scope by a decade, and the Global South witnessed the West collectively shrug when 800,000 were slaughtered in Rwanda. Fast forward to the global spread of COVID-19, the sense is

against and 18 did not vote on a motion to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Of the 54 African countries, ten supported the suspension, nine voted against, 24 abstained and 11 did not vote.

- ⁴ During a joint August 2022 press conference with Secretary Blinken, South African Foreign Affairs Minister Naledi Pandor [criticized](#) “the sense of patronizing bullying” of the West.
- ⁵ This third trip included Mali, Sudan and Mauritania. Lavrov’s second trip included South Africa, Eritrea, Angola and Eswatini. Last July, he visited Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the DRC.
- ⁶ As noted by [Leela Jacinto](#), in a post on France24 (February 2023), while the term “Global South” is much debated, it is widely used in spite of the geographical inaccuracies (Australia and New Zealand, for example, would be excluded). She cites the list of the [UN Finance Center for South-South Cooperation](#) (group of 77, plus China).

palpable in the Global South that the West failed the rest of the world in responding to the pandemic.

For four years, a president of the United States disparaged much of the rest of the world, some with the distinction of being branded in language that was clearly racist, imposed a travel ban from Muslim countries, abandoned allies in Syria, pulled out of the Paris Agreement, walked away, with no justification, from an agreement the United States had only recently concluded as part of the P5+1 talks, and threatened to pull out of NATO. After four years of Trump, and no guarantee that Trump 2.0 or another inward-looking Republican administration will not drive US foreign policy beginning January 20, 2025, it should come as no surprise that many view the US-driven world order as ending or having ended. There is an irony though, as US diplomatic, intelligence and economic power, materiel and financial resources have been at the core of the defense of Ukraine.

While capital is being deployed at exceptionally high levels to support the Ukrainians, and orders of magnitude more will be needed to rebuild Ukraine, today funds are being diverted from humanitarian, security and other crises (from Yemen and Ethiopia to Afghanistan) in the Global South. The world is watching.

I pause here for a moment: while Americans broadly may have less appreciation of developments around the world, make no mistake, the converse is not the case. Even before social media, our actions were closely watched; social media has turbocharged that scrutiny. From the perspective of many in the Global South, the beacon of freedom and liberty has failed to live up to its values. No amount of disinformation or other information warfare has been needed to stir up disappointment, resentment or anger. Now layer in that disinformation – be it from Russian, China, North Korea or Iran, and the views understandably, and regrettably, become more toxic.

Filling the Vacuum

While the West created a vacuum, China and Russia eagerly have filled the void. In the words of Matthew Burrows and Aude Darnal [writing](#) in a Stimson Center Policy Memo (“Red Cell: Is the West losing the Global South” - December 2022), “Partly in response to Western pressure on them, Beijing and Moscow have upped their game in the Global South.” Russia (or more accurately the Soviet Union) supported a number of liberation movements in Africa, and it has no history of colonization to answer for. For example, in South Africa, the ties between the African National Congress and the Soviet Union date back to the apartheid era, with the ANC receiving paramilitary training and support during much of the Cold War.⁷

Despite the urging of the likes of President Obama, [speaking](#) in Nairobi in 2015, to move beyond colonialism as an explanation for current conditions in Africa, the colonial era can be trotted out as a convenient scapegoat and, so, has resonance. Other countries are

⁷ See also, [post](#) by Ebenezer Obadare on the Council on Foreign Relations’ Africa in Transition page, summarized in my [previous briefing note](#).

more recent beneficiaries of support from Moscow, often in the form of the presence of [Wagner mercenaries](#). Yet others are benefiting by negotiating heavy discounts for Russian oil and gas (imports of Russian oil by China and India have soared since the invasion).

A New Paradigm?

Russia is exploiting a growing embrace by countries in the Global South of a multipolar world to counter Western hegemony. Foreign Minister Lavrov regularly extols the virtue of creating a multipolar world (be it in his June 2021 [article](#) in *Kommersant* or in meetings with Chinese leaders or in Africa). Putin too has regularly cited the transition to a multipolar world (see, e.g., [Address to Duma leaders](#)). Creating a multipolar world order incidentally was a key theme of the [joint statement](#) issued by Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping at the 2022 Winter Olympics less than three weeks before the invasion. For the Global South, perspectives on geopolitics are unlikely to build on the Cold War model in which states align with the United States, or Russia or China.

What the West is seeing as “fence sitting” may be the beginning of a new paradigm of picking and choosing among different, and far more fluid, security, diplomatic, economic and cultural alliances. As security expert Dr. Claudia Major pointed out, the West may be misreading “fence sitting” as Western policymakers see it as implying that these countries need to decide where “they want to sit,” when in fact it may be empowering – a moment of power and sovereignty. This then behooves the West to reimagine a constructive role for the Global South that moves beyond the with-us-or-against-us paradigm.⁸

Evidence of the emergence of a post-Western world is not limited to government policy. A [Policy Brief](#) published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (“United West, Divided from the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into Russia’s War on Ukraine” - February 2023) shows that while Americans and Europeans agree that their countries should help Ukraine to win, that Russia is the clear adversary and that the coming global order is a bipolar one (led by the United States and China), in China, Russia, Turkiye and India, the sentiment favors a quick end to the war, even if it means Ukraine has to concede territory, and the likely trend is towards fragmentation into a multipolar world. While non-Western opinion is split on characterization of the war, it is clear that the conflict is not viewed in the Global South as a battle between democracy and autocracy.

Opportunities for the West

For countries in the Global South, Western preoccupation with Russia-Ukraine, which they view as a purely regional conflict, means less attention is being paid in multilateral forums (most recently the Munich Security Conference) to what they see as the more pressing problems of food insecurity, higher energy prices, soaring levels of debt, inflation and climate change. This perspective incidentally conveniently sidesteps the

⁸ Remarks at the CNAS [webinar](#) “Marking One Year of the War in Ukraine” (February 2023).

reality that food insecurity and higher energy prices are the direct result of Russia's invasion and subsequent actions. Somehow the consequences can be conveniently ignored when the cause fits within a different narrative.

As [Burrows and Darnal](#) note, if the West wants to retain its relevance as economic growth and population shift to the Global South,⁹ greater attention needs to be paid to the Global South. Fighting the effects of climate change requires a global response and, in terms of security, the last 25 years have shown that fragile states can breed insurgencies that pose threats well beyond their borders. The Global South is particularly vulnerable to food and energy insecurity, and climate change overall.

As for the pandemic, as [Burrows and Darnal](#) note, it largely wiped out significant benefits generated by globalization, consigning many in the then-rising middle class in the Global South back to poverty. The impact of the pandemic has been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine.

Ukraine has a role to play as does the West. President Zelensky recognizes that he needs a stronger narrative directed at the Global South. As Bobby Ghosh, of Bloomberg, [writing](#) in the Washington Post ("Zelensky Must Rewrite Russia's Narrative in the Global South - February 2023), posits, a Ukrainian narrative of colonial and imperial oppression should resonate with countries that have suffered both, as should an emphasis on Cold War-era ties, as many African leaders trained by the Soviet Union were educated in Ukraine not Russia. Ukrainian social media should resonate with non-elites.

For the West, the prescriptions must be broader, but the efforts to find common ground must be based on an understanding of the landscape. (Incidentally, and a theme for another briefing note, the unity of the West when it comes to Ukraine may not be as robust as first meets the eye.)

As for that landscape, first, it was a mistake to assume that the anti-colonial sentiment that swept through Africa beginning in the late 1950s would mean that countries in Africa would align with the West in the face of the invasion and clear violation of international law. We cannot take support for granted. Second, as Aude Darnal, [writing](#) in Just Security ("How the War in Ukraine Illustrates the Weakness of US Policy towards Africa" - April 2022) notes, receipt of US military assistance is not a guarantee of alignment. Third, as Darnal also posits, ideology is not necessarily an indicator of such alignment. As she notes, while some countries that did not vote to condemn Russia are considered authoritarian (by the Economic Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index), others that failed to side with Ukraine are considered hybrid regimes or flawed democracies

⁹ By 2050, Sub-Saharan Africa's population is expected to increase from 1.3 billion today to 2.25 billion, a third of the world's young people will live in Africa and its workforce (ages 25-64) will have doubled from approximately 12% today to one billion (representing 23% of the global workforce). (See [UN Population Statistics](#).)

(and scored above the average on the Index), and some that sided with Ukraine (the DRC and Somalia) scored below the average on the Index.

Darnal goes on to attribute the bifurcation to growing ties with Russia, in some significant cases reflecting frustration with the nature of the West's engagement with Africa and the consequent desire to recalibrate their relations with the United States and Russia. Russia has increased trade and economic investments, the capstone for which may be the second Moscow Summit.

This all calls for greater engagement on the part of the United States and recognition that the old models are not resonating across Africa and other parts of the Global South. China, and to a lesser extent, Russia have shown the way in terms of investment, but arguably neither's commitments are particularly sustainable (both in the traditional sense of the term as well as in the context of addressing climate change and biodiversity loss), and certainly do not contribute to the greater common good and social justice. As the United States and Europe transition to a net-zero economy, the opportunities should drive levels of engagement and understanding that have the potential to be viewed more positively in states that are now less interested in, and have the power to avoid, taking sides. Addressing the devastating by-products of the invasion – food and energy insecurity and economic dislocation that have wreaked havoc across the Global South – could serve as the basis for a reorientation.

Concluding Thoughts

The Russian invasion has been transformative in multiple respects, principally in Europe:

- The expectation that war in Europe would not break out (peace on the continent being the bedrock of the European experiment – from the European Coal and Steel Community, to the Treaties of Rome creating the European Economic Community, to the Single European Act and finally the Maastricht Treaty creating the European Union) has been dashed.
- The expectation that business as usual with Russia could continue has been dashed.
- The expectation that international borders and international law are inviolate has been dashed.
- The view that China should dominate US defense policy has been undermined.
- European military arsenals, budgets, and security and strategic priorities are being revisited to reflect the shift in views from the inevitability of peace to the imperative of military power.
- Germany has abandoned pacificism, and Finland and Sweden have abandoned neutrality.
- Europe has absorbed millions of Ukrainian refugees and pledged billions in aid.
- The dependence of Europe on the United States in the realm of security is yet again evident, and concerns over US security commitments in light of US

domestic politics are back on the European agenda, as is navigating internal EU politics.

- Europe has had to ween itself off of Russian energy exports.

The reaction to the invasion should be seen as an important wake-up call that the unexpected consolidation in the West needs to take account of an increasingly divided evolving global order in which the West no longer dictates or dominates outcomes. Those are medium- to longer-term challenges. In the short-term, it is imperative that the unity of the West remains intact and that Russia ultimately does not prevail in Ukraine.

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