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5 Reasons Why Much of the Global South Isn't Automatically Supporting the West in Ukraine

In October 2022, about eight months after the war in Ukraine started, the University of Cambridge in the UK harmonized surveys conducted in 137 countries about their attitudes towards the West and towards Russia and China.

The [findings in the study](#), while not free of a margin of error, are robust enough to take seriously.

These are:

- For the 6.3 billion people who live outside of the West, 66 percent feel positively towards Russia and 70 percent feel positively towards China, and,
- Among the 66 percent who feel positively about Russia the breakdown is 75 percent in South Asia, 68 percent in Francophone Africa, and 62 percent in Southeast Asia.
- Public opinion of Russia remains positive in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam.

Sentiments of this nature have caused some ire, surprise, and even anger in the West. It is difficult for them to believe that two-thirds of the world's population is not siding with the West.

What are some of the reasons or causes for this? I believe there are five reasons as explained in this brief essay.

1. The Global South does not believe that the West understands or empathizes with their problems.

India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, summed it up succinctly in a recent interview: "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems,

but the world's problems are not Europe's problems." He is referring to the many challenges that developing countries face whether they relate to the aftermath of the pandemic, the high cost of debt service, the climate crisis that is ravaging their lives, the pain of poverty, food shortages, droughts, and high energy prices. The West has barely given lip service to the Global South on many of these problems. Yet the West is insisting that the Global South join it in sanctioning Russia.

The Covid pandemic is a perfect example—despite the Global South's repeated pleas to share intellectual property on the vaccines, with the goal of saving lives, no Western nation was willing to do so. Africa remains to this day the most unvaccinated continent in the world. Africa had the capability to make the vaccines but without the intellectual property they could not do it.

But help did come from Russia, China, and India. Algeria launched a vaccination program in January 2021 after it received its first batch of Russia's Sputnik V vaccines. Egypt started vaccinations after it got China's Sinopharm vaccine at about the same time. South Africa procured a million doses of AstraZeneca from the Serum Institute of India. In Argentina, Sputnik became the backbone of their vaccine program. All of this was happening while the West was using its financial resources to buy millions of doses in advance, and often destroying them when they became outdated. The message to the Global South was clear—your problems are your problems, they are not our problems.

2. History Matters: Who stood where during colonialism and after independence?

Many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia view the war in Ukraine through a different lens than the West. Many of them see their former colonial powers regrouped as members of the Western alliance. The countries that have sanctioned Russia are either members of the European Union and NATO or the closest allies of the United States in the Asia Pacific region. By contrast, many countries in Asia, and almost all countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America have tried to remain on good terms with *both* Russia and the West, and to shun sanctions against Russia. Could it be because they remember their history at the receiving end of the West's colonial policies, a trauma that they still live with but which the West has mostly forgotten.

Nelson Mandela often said that it was the Soviet Union's support, both moral and material, that helped inspire Southern Africans to overthrow the Apartheid regime. It is because of this that Russia is still viewed in a favorable light by many African countries. And once Independence came for these countries, it was the Soviet Union that supported them even though it had limited resources itself. The Aswan Dam in Egypt which took 11

years to build, from 1960 to 1971, was designed by the Moscow based Hydro project Institute and financed in large part by the Soviet Union. The Bhilai Steel Plant in India, one of the first large infrastructure projects in a newly independent India, was set up by the USSR in 1959. Other countries also benefited from the support provided by the former Soviet Union, both political and economic, including Ghana, Mali, Sudan, Angola, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Mozambique.

On February 18, 2023, at the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the foreign minister of Uganda, Jeje Odongo, had this to say, “We were colonized and forgave those who colonized us. Now the colonizers are asking us to be enemies of Russia, who never colonized us. Is that fair? Not for us. Their enemies are their enemies. Our friends are our friends.”

Rightly or wrongly, present day Russia is seen by many countries in the Global South as an ideological successor to the former Soviet Union. These countries have a long memory that makes them view Russia in a somewhat different light. Given the history, can we blame them?

3. The war in Ukraine is seen by the Global South as mainly about the future of Europe rather than the future of the entire world.

The history of the Cold War has taught developing countries that getting embroiled in great power conflicts generates few benefits for them yet carries enormous risks. And they view the Ukraine proxy war as one that is more about the future of European security than the future of the entire world. Furthermore, the war is seen by the Global South as an expensive distraction from the most pressing issues that they are dealing with. These include higher fuel prices, food prices, higher debt service costs, and more inflation, all of which have become more aggravated because of the Western sanctions that have been imposed on Russia.

A recent survey published by Nature Energy states that up to 140 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty due to the higher energy prices that have come about over the past year.

Soaring energy prices not only directly impact energy bills, but they also lead to upward price pressures on all supply chains and consumer items, including food and other necessities. This hurts the developing countries even more than it hurts the West.

The West can sustain the war “as long as it takes” since they have the financial resources and the capital markets to do so. But the Global South does not have the same luxury. A war for the future of European security has the potential of devastating the security of the

entire world.

The Global South is also alarmed that the West is not pursuing negotiations that could bring this war to an early end. There were missed opportunities in December 2021 when Russia proposed revised security treaties for Europe that could have prevented the war and which were rejected by the West. The peace negotiations of April 2022 in Istanbul were also rejected by the West in part to “weaken” Russia. And now the entire world is paying the price for an invasion that the Western media like to call “unprovoked” and which could have been avoided.

4. The world economy is no longer American dominated or Western led and the Global South does have other options.

Several countries in the Global South increasingly see their future tied to countries that are no longer in the Western sphere of influence. Whether this is their perception of how the power balance is shifting away from the West, or wishful thinking as part of their colonial legacy, let us look at some metrics that may be relevant.

The U.S. share of global output declined from 21 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2021, while China’s share rose from 4 percent to 19 percent during the same period. China is the largest trading partner for most of the world, and its GDP in purchasing power parity already exceeds that of the United States. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa) had a combined GDP in 2021 of \$42 trillion compared with \$41 trillion in the G7. Their population of 3.2 billion is more than 4.5 times the combined population of the G7 countries, at 700 million.

The BRICS are not imposing sanctions on Russia nor supplying arms to the opposing side. While Russia is the biggest supplier of energy and foodgrains for the Global South, China remains the biggest supplier of financing and infrastructure projects to them through the Belt and Road Initiative. And now Russia and China are closer than ever before because of the war. What does it all mean for developing countries?

It means that when it comes to financing, food, energy, and infrastructure, the Global South must rely more on China and Russia more than on the West. The Global South is also seeing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization expanding, more countries wanting to join the BRICS, and many countries now trading in currencies that move them away from the dollar, the Euro, or the West. They also see a deindustrialization taking place in some countries in Europe because of higher energy costs, along with higher inflation. This makes quite apparent an economic vulnerability in the West that was not so evident before the war. With developing countries having an obligation to put the interests of their own

citizens first, is it any wonder that they see their future tied more to countries that are not Western led or American dominated?

5. The “rule based international order” is lacking in credibility and is in decline.

The “rule based international order” is a concept that is seen by many countries in the Global South as one that has been conceived by the West and imposed unilaterally on other countries. Few if any non-Western countries ever signed on to this order. The South is not opposed to a rule-based order, but rather to the present content of these rules as conceived by the West.

But one must also ask, does the rule based international order apply even to the West?

For decades now, for many in the Global South, the West is seen to have had its way with the world without regard to anyone else’s views. Several countries were invaded at will, mostly without Security Council authorization. These include the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Under what “rules” were those countries attacked or devastated, and were those wars provoked or unprovoked? Julian Assange is languishing in prison, and Ed Snowden is in exile, for having the courage (or perhaps the audacity) to expose the truths behind these actions.

Sanctions imposed on over 40 countries by the West impose considerable hardship and suffering. Under what international law or “rules-based order” did the West use its economic strength to impose these sanctions? Why are the assets of Afghanistan still frozen in Western banks while the country is facing starvation and famine? Why is Venezuelan gold still held hostage in the UK while the people of Venezuela are living at subsistence levels? And if Sy Hersh’s expose is true, under what “rules-based order” did the West destroy the Nord Stream pipelines?

There appears to be a paradigm shift that is taking place away from a Western dominated world and into a more multipolar world. And the war in Ukraine has made more evident those differences or chasms that are part of this paradigm shift. Partly because of its own history, and partly because of the economic realities that are emerging, the Global South sees a multipolar world as a preferable outcome in which their voices are more likely to be heard.

President Kennedy ended his American University speech in 1963 with the following words: “We must do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just. We are not helpless before that task or hopeless for its success. Confident and unafraid, we must labor on towards a strategy of peace.”

That strategy of peace was the challenge before us in 1963 and they remain a challenge for

us today. And the voices for peace, including those of the Global South, need to be heard.

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