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SPECIAL SECTION

The war in Ukraine, the Global South and the evolving global order

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Abstract

This special section explores how nine key countries from the Global South have responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As the Western attempt to build a global anti-Russia coalition has largely failed, the focus on countries from the Global South becomes more important but remains under-researched in the discipline. This introductory article offers the conceptual framework for the following empirical contributions. Based on the rational and constructivist school of thinking, we develop four guiding assumptions. Accordingly, we assume that foreign policy positioning to the war relates to the varied consequences of the conflict, can be related to strategic opportunism, displays pragmatic indifference or is value-driven. Contributions to this special section offer a detailed empirical analysis according to these four conceptual categories.

1 | RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR: THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The Kremlin has maintained that it is undertaking a 'special military operation' in Ukraine to achieve 'demilitarisation and denazification' of Ukraine and to achieve other geopolitical and security objectives. The US and its allies, but also many countries outside the political West, have condemned Russia for invading Ukraine, violating its territorial integrity and sovereignty, for human right violations and war crimes in Ukraine, and for annexing the oblasts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia. They contend that Moscow's actions have violated the United Nations (UN) Charter and international norms, and have upended the rules-based liberal international order.

The US and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Moscow—financial, economic and commercial sanctions including outright bans and/or restrictions on the import of Russian goods and services such as coal and oil and gas, ban on transfer of technology and other restrictive measures.[1] These countries have introduced resolutions in international forums including the UN to condemn Russia for invading Ukraine asking Moscow to withdraw troops and restoring the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. To allow Kyiv to defend itself against Moscow's aggression, Washington and its allies have provided Kyiv with political, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and military assistance including billions of dollars worth of arms and ammunition, training and military intelligence. Without this support, Ukraine, very likely, would not have been able to withhold the invasion.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a 'Zeitenwende' or a watershed moment for Europe in the twenty-first century.[2] It may well turn out as one of the global watershed moments. Its implications are being felt nearly globally, hitting a world, which is already experiencing fundamental changes and multiple crisis at once, ranging from great power rivalry, post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery and the aggravating climate crisis. The crisis of the postliberal order has been identified as a leading paradigm of our time (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Öniş & Kutlay, 2020; Pattison, 2022). Thereby, the world order is restructured and rearranged moving beyond the liberal but also the West's hegemonic position. This is an unfinished but ongoing process. A single dominant pattern of order is difficult to identify; thus, scholarship

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also refers to a multi-order or multiplex system in which authority is more and more dispersed if not fragmented (Acharya, 2017; Flockhart, 2016). Increasingly, the global order is characterised by fluid allegiances, blocs, foreign policy groups such as the BRICS and others as well as ad hoc coalitions (Brosig, 2019; Reyker et al., 2023). There are numerous camps competing for power with countries seeking multiple alignments. It should not be surprising to see major/great powers and regional powers occasionally sitting on the fence and/or occasionally standing on opposing sides (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022; Stephens, 2022).

Undeniably, the world is getting more divisive, complex and harder to navigate. While changes in the word order have occurred incrementally most of the time, transformation is accelerated at times of crisis. The war in Ukraine constitutes such a catalytic moment in which the existing order is severely disrupted but also reconstructed, rearranged and at some point, consolidated. In such a context, exploring the response of the international community to the war is pivotal for understanding how the world order is reconfigured. Naturally, much of the debate around the war concentrates on its most prominent protagonists: Russia, the US, Europe and Ukraine (Götz & Staun, 2022).

However, efforts to forge a global anti-Russia coalition with extensive sanctions adopted by the US, Europe and G7 countries have largely not been endorsed outside of the West (Verma & Düben, 2024). Arms shipments and sanctions are hardly applied by non-Western countries with the exception of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. For many Western observers, this is surprising, as developing countries strongly endorse classical state sovereignty, such as territorial integrity and political independence resulting from colonial experience (Alden, 2023). For this reason, this special section explores why there is no global coherent response to the war in Ukraine. This special section particularly focuses on countries of the Global South and their positioning towards the war and consequences for the global order.

2 | THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR

In 1969, Carl Oglesby, a political activist, coined the term 'Global South'. In the context of the Vietnam War, he wrote in the liberal Catholic magazine 'Commonwealth' that the war was the zenith of the North's domination over the Global South. However, the term Global South gained prominence only after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Prior to that, underdeveloped/developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America were referred to as the 'Third World, a term coined by Alfred Sauvy, the French demographer, in 1952. The term Third World was replaced in the new millennium by the Global South. During the Cold War, the Third World formed the backbone of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Global South brings together countries from across the globe which have variegated economic and political systems, asymmetrical economic power (for instance emerging powers and least developed countries) and diverse military capabilities. However, these vagaries have not prevented these countries from taking common policy positions in international affairs and multilateral settings. These countries suffered from the yoke of Western imperialism and colonialism. Thus, they are very strong advocates of nationalism, political independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the twenty-first century, political and diplomatic influence of some of the countries in the Global South, especially countries in the Asia-Pacific, has increased tremendously with commensurate economic growth, with these countries not shying away from flexing their economic, political and diplomatic muscle, and seeking reform of the Western-dominated international order. Despite a visible increase in international relevance and influence, the Global South does not form a coherent political bloc nor does it have an official representative, for example in the form of a treaty-based organisation. Thus, it is not always straightforwardly clear what a Global South position is. However, we can still explore what position key members of this group have taken in the response to the war. The West's relative decline in power, for example, in the Middle East, opened up space for non-Western powers especially China (Leonard, 2024). While there is no Global South strategy as such, its role and positioning becomes more relevant for global order transitions.

For this reason, this special section is exploring how the current varied approach to the Russia-Ukraine war has emerged. This requires understanding the position(s) taken by the Global South from the inside. While often not siding directly with Russia, significant parts of the Global South have also shied away from condemning Russia for invading Ukraine or cutting economic ties. For instance, since the invasion, more than 40 countries representing almost half of the world population have either abstained or voted against motions introduced in the UN to chastise Russia for invading Ukraine. In April 2022, 58 countries abstained on a vote to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council despite overwhelming evidence of human rights violation by Russian forces in Ukraine (Alden, 2023). The African continent is nearly equally split between countries abstaining or not voting and voting for condemning Russia. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, countries which have adopted a neutral position in the Russia-Ukraine war comprise around two-thirds of the world's population (The Economist, 2023). The list of countries includes democracies such as India, Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa which want a cessation to the war, are not concerned about who the guilty party is

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TABLE 1 Mapping of country cases.

	Argentina	Brazil	China	Egypt	India	Indonesia	Nigeria	South Africa	Saudi Arabia
Varied consequentialism	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Pragmatic indifference	X	X		X			X		
Strategic opportunism	X		X		X	X		X	X
Value-driven	X						X		

and are unwilling to sanction Moscow (Alden, 2023). Although non-alignment is claimed, its instantiation is neither coherent across countries nor is it strictly neutral (Sidiropoulos, 2022). Unsurprisingly, countries outside the West prioritise their interests when adopting a position to the war. Despite the West's efforts to form a global coalition against Russia, it has not materialised.

While the West's positioning of countering Russian aggression through sanctions and supporting Ukraine militarily is rather unsurprising, the response of the Global South requires closer examination. In this special section, we are gathering authors based in nine countries in the Global South namely Argentina, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and South Africa. These countries are not only regional powers in their regions/subregions but also key constituents of the Global South with significant influence/heft in global affairs. For instance, China with the second largest economy in the world and a peer competitor to the US is not a member of the Global South but considers itself to be a constituent of the group and perceives itself as the leader of the group. India is a rising power and the fifth largest economy in the world and will become the third largest economy by 2030. It competes with China for the leadership of the Global South. India and China along with Brazil and South Africa are members of BRICS+ and are regional hegemons (although their hegemony is contested by other countries in the region). Similarly, Indonesia, Egypt and Nigeria are regional hegemons in Southeast Asia, North Africa and West Africa, respectively. Saudi Arabia and Argentina are regional powers with Saudi Arabia a very influential player in the Islamic world and one of the largest oil producers and exporters in the world.

These countries also have variegated political systems with Argentina, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and South Africa vibrant and flourishing democracies with peaceful power transitions. China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have autocratic/authoritarian political systems. China and Saudi Arabia are non-democracies with China being a one-party state and Saudi Arabia an Islamic monarchy. However, contributors in the special section highlight that the difference in the political systems has little or no bearing on these countries' stance in the Russia-Ukraine war (see Table 1).

The countries' stance is influenced more by their foreign policy orientation. China arguably adopted a more anti-Western foreign policy orientation under President Xi Jinping which increasingly displays a critique of Western positions. And, like Moscow, Beijing challenges many aspects of the US-led Western liberal order by aligning with countries which are disillusioned by the behaviour of many Western countries and frustrated by Western countries' own repeated violations of the very order and its values which they have created. Global South countries are also of course disenchanted with the constituent institutions

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of the 'liberal order', notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The remaining countries want to reform and restructure the extant order to maximise their national interests, enhance their status and influence, and have a greater voice in world affairs.

Together, we aim at exploring how these regionally and globally influential players outside the political West are perceiving and positioning themselves to the war and thereby actively engaging in world order making.

The contributors address following questions:

- What is the respective country's stance/position on the Russia-Ukraine war?
- What factors have influenced the country's position/stance in the context of the country's bilateral relationship with Russia?
- What narrative (world view or theoretical perspective) is used to explain the foreign policy choice?
- How have economic relations developed with Russia and Ukraine since the beginning of the war?
- How is the positioning to the war contributing to global order making?

3 | MULTIPLE CAUSATION AND THEORETICAL HETEROGENEITY

We are guided by two schools of thought in International Relations discipline: rationalism and constructivism. Both schools are not mutually exclusive but can be understood as explaining and operating on their respective home turf covering a continuum of options. We do not expect that a single explanation would suffice for explaining the Global South's positioning to the war. Rather we aim at mapping different explanations linked to either rational or constructivist arguments or a combination of both. Multiple causality of various conditions is our baseline assumption.

On the rational side with its emphasis on cost–benefit calculations and economic and security/defence considerations, we focus extensively on bilateral relations with Russia and how this has influenced respective positions. We argue that varied responses to the war can be best explained by reference to two rational components.

First, **varied consequentialism** of the war. Here we concentrate on the effects of the war on the Global South which are many, diverse and even appear as unexpected, reaching from food price inflation on the one side (Russia and Ukraine are major grain exporters) to having access to discounted oil (Western sanctions reward India and China through introducing a price cap) (Glauben et al., 2022). Countries in the Global South have also been hurt by economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West because the sanctions restrict commercial transactions with Russian companies. Given these vastly different consequences (cost/benefits), contributors are exploring how this is impacting on the Global South's positioning to the war? Implicitly, we assume that countries with close economic ties, displaying either dependency or vulnerability to changes in energy or food trade are disincentivised from isolating Russia politically and economically.

Second, while it is true that the war and Western sanctions have a direct influence on the availability and price of essential global commodities like oil, gas, wheat, fertiliser etc. which are difficult to substitute on an ad hoc basis, it is also true that many countries are not directly affected by economic consequences of the war and do not want to be forced to take sides either for or against Russia and/or the West. Thus, when the cost–benefit perspective is neutral, we summon that these countries apply a position of **pragmatic indifference**. This leads to the adoption of foreign policy choices which resonates best with pre-defined geostrategic goals which are external to the war in Ukraine. An in-different position is likely to favour the status quo over drastic policy changes because a drastic change in policy requires the use of resources be it material (economic) or social (political). Countries opting for an indifferent position are unlikely to implement hard sanctions.

On the constructivist side, with the emphasis on norms, identity and justice in international relations, we can identify at least two perspectives helping to explain the Global South's position taking. First, the argument that foreign policy positions are primarily shaped by prior existing ideological worldviews which are interlinked with national preferences. In this context, we assume that at the international stage, countries adopt the position which creates the least dissonance with their own value structure. In other words, their response is domestic **value-driven.** In this context, the key question is, how is the war and the response to it normatively constructed and how easily is it resonating with prior-existing worldviews? A value-driven approach is most likely to appear when countries are detached from direct consequences of the war (including sanctions against Russia) or the consequences and value-driven approach are congruent, meaning, the cost of the positioning and domestic values are aligned with each other and thereby reinforcing themselves.

Global South countries tend to favour a decolonial worldview in which Western hegemony is seen critically and their own position in global affairs is elevated. This directly results from the experience of the colonial past. In fact, 'postcolonial states are much more vulnerable to physical and normative intrusion from outside' (Ayoob, 2002: 33). A deep-seated scepticism about disciplining instruments like sanctions is widespread. In this context, the response to the war should at least not be in dissonance to

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this worldview, but ideally reinforcing it. A dilemma emerges, while closely aligning with the West through, for example, rhetorical condemnation and applying punitive sanctions contravenes a decolonial perspective and weakens a key non-Western country, while at the same time, actively opposing the West legitimises Russian imperial ambitions. In such a situation, it is important to explore how countries of the Global South position and rhetorically explain/justify their position.

Second, **strategic opportunism.** It cannot be denied that norms and values are also used strategically. Thus, the motivation to invoke certain moral claims is external to the norms and values propagated. Countries frequently use ideologically framed language to achieve other strategic goals. Opportunistic behaviour should not be ruled out for the Global South. Thus, we also aim at exploring to what extent normative arguments are invoked instrumentally. For example, is the overcoming of post-colonial structures and hierarchies in international affairs an instrument for hegemonic aspirations or is decolonial rhetoric firmly rooted in normative arguments informing foreign policy position taking?

The nine country-focused contributions to this special section offer a rich empirical analysis of how key actors of the Global South have responded to the war. Based on the analytical categories provided above, Table 1 offers an initial mapping of responses. Unsurprisingly a diverse picture emerges. Across the board, there is not a single explanation which would be sufficient to explain position taking but various conditions are at play for different sets of actors. However, consequentialist foreign policy behaviour appears as frequently as strategic opportunism or a pragmatic position of indifference. Only the value-driven approach occurs relatively infrequently. Thus, rational actor behaviour seems to explain a fairly large degree of positioning.

What stands out is the frequent combination of varied consequentialism and strategic opportunism. They do often appear simultaneously. This implies that countries try to offset the negative consequences of the war through strategic gains in other areas. In other words, strongly aligning with Western countries against Russia, can not only be costly, for example through secondary effects of sanctions, it also runs against geo-strategic goals aiming to end Western hegemony in the global system. However, in detail, the costs and benefits through sanctions, food and energy prices vary significantly across countries and are not unidirectional as the detailed case studies will show. Interestingly, a pragmatic indifferent position is primarily taken by countries which are often not affected by varied consequences. In fact, for most countries of the Global South, the war is peripheral, economically and politically, but with the potential for major disruptions in their foreign policy. As a consequence of the war, they do not see much value in strongly aligning with either side, the West or Russia, and thus might rhetorically condemn the invasion but not follow through with sanctions. The country cases provide for a comprehensive comparative analysis.

4 | CONCLUSION

This special section makes an important contribution to the analysis of Global South's foreign policy position forming by exploring a major security crisis which has the potential to accelerate global order changes into an era of post-liberalism. As the war continues, it is too early to discuss final conclusions of this transformation process, but the inability of the West to form a global anti-Russia coalition points to the need to better explore how, when and why Global South countries are positioning themselves to this and other crises the way they do. They often remain under-researched actors. While it is unlikely that countries of the Global South are dictating the course of the war, they are chiefly involved in how the world responds to it and thereby engage in world order making.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author reports no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data has bene generated in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] However, the sanction regime is not all-comprehensive. Western countries continue to import Russian energy exports but at a much-reduced scale.

[2] The term Zeitenwende was coined by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of Germany in a speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022 (Bundesregierung, 2022).

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