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SPECIAL SECTION

Aligned or non-aligned: South Africa's response to the war in Ukraine

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Abstract

This contribution explores South Africa's position in the war in Ukraine. As a major African player, member of BRICS, the G20, and frequent UN Security Council member, the country is a globally engaged and regionally leading actor. Since the beginning of the conflict, South Africa has declared itself as non-aligned; however, its close political relations with Russia and disinclination to condemn the invasion have raised the issue of whether the country is only declaratory neutral. Although South Africa is only indirectly affected by the war, it was chiefly involved in the first major peace initiative spearheaded by a select group of African countries. This contribution traces South Africa's official state response to the war, exploring its narrative of the conflict and is interrogating its version of non-alignment in the context of a transitioning world order.

1 | INTRODUCTION

South Africa, as a self-declared non-aligned country, is playing a visible role in crafting a non-Western response to the war. The country actively drafted resolutions in the UN General Assembly, led the African Peace Initiative and entertains close political relations with Russia and countries from the Global South as well as the West.

South Africa, despite being geographically remote and economically detached from the conflict, occupies no marginal position in the global competition over the dominant narrative through which the war and the response to it are framed. For Western countries as well as for Russia, South Africa's positioning is important. Inclining to either side implies that an eminent non-western country is at a distance from Russia and maybe other non-Western countries could follow, or it signals relative indifference for the invasion. A clear inclination towards either side, however, risks deteriorating relations with the other part. South Africa's economic relations concentrate on Western countries, China, and regional neighbours, which are the biggest trading partners. The war in Ukraine only affects South Africa indirectly through higher energy prices in 2022 and inflation pressure. These, however, cannot only refer to the war but also precede it. Trade with Russia is marginal, accounting for less than two percent.

South Africa's non-alignment position continues with the country's traditional foreign policy approach. This is centred on favouring close relations with non-Western powers in order to push for changes in the global order, which is perceived to be liberal only by name but is de facto deeply unjust and compromised by Western hegemony (DIRCO, 2022d: 20–21). Traditionally, South Africa placed great importance on conflict mediation and reconciliation, using its own experience of transition from an Apartheid state to a constitutional democracy. It played an important role in conflict mediation in various conflicts in Africa, often favouring power-sharing agreements. The war in Ukraine poses a challenge for South African foreign policy. How to reconcile close relations with Russia as a key non-Western partner needed for transforming the world order but at the same time opposing imperial power execution? The country has not presented a convincing position, as its claimed non-alignment is punctuated.

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2 | THE WAR AND SOUTH AFRICA'S POSITION

This contribution mainly concentrates on exploring the non-aligned position of South Africa, starting with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and covering events until the end of 2023. At the centre of the analysis is the diplomatic response to the war and how it is integrated into a narrative framework justifying the position taken.

The prelude to the full-scale invasion covers a longer period in which Ukraine experienced an internal domestic struggle and continued mass protests against then-President Yanukovich's alignment with Russia instead of signing an EU association agreement. With the expulsion of Yanukovich, Ukraine turned closer to the EU. Russia compensated for its loss of political influence with the annexation of Crimea and actively supporting the violent breakaway of the Donbas in 2014.

In this context, South Africa neither endorsed nor condemned Russian action. It abstained from UN General Assembly resolution 68/262, which emphasised Ukrainian territorial integrity and calls for a peaceful solution. Two years later, South Africa voted against a resolution (71/205) condemning the occupation of Crimea and pointing to the human rights situation on the peninsula. Shortly after adopting resolution 68/262, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) issued a statement in which it called for dialogue, revoked sanctions, violent action, and issued support for the OSCE observer mission (DIRCO, 2014). Reference to the territorial integrity of Ukraine was avoided. While there is a qualitative difference between the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022, South Africa's response displays a degree of continuity.

On the day of the invasion, 24 February 2022, foreign minister Naledi Pandor expressed her dismay over the escalation of the conflict, calling on "Russia to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine" and formulating South Africa's "strong commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict" (DIRCO, 2022a). This statement is coming close of identifying Russia as an invasion force but is falling short of condemning the Russian invasion. However, soon after the statement, President Ramaphosa was reportedly unhappy over demanding a Russian troop withdrawal (Sunday Times, 27 February 2022). Subsequently, such a demand was dropped.

South Africa's position in the war received more contours during the UN General Assembly emergency session. South Africa abstained from all voting sessions for the six resolutions that have been adopted. Four of the six resolutions were adopted by a majority of between 140 and 143 with 14–20 countries abstaining (UN digital library). Thus, at the global level, the South African voting pattern is a minority position. One cannot even argue that it reflects on the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), as the majority of countries voted for condemning Russia.

A different picture emerges when focusing only on African countries. Here, countries are almost equally split over voting in favour of the resolutions or abstaining. African divisions over the war also explain the absence of a common African Union position on Ukraine (Staeger, 2023). The four resolutions that received the most votes are straightforwardly framing the war as a consequence of Russian aggression, calling for troop withdrawal and accountability for committed war crimes. Less support was visible for two resolutions – expelling Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and reparations for Ukraine.

South Africa endorsed a different framing. It has not supported these resolutions because they do "not create an environment conducive for diplomacy, dialogue, and mediation" (DIRCO, 2022b). While South Africa agreed to calls for mediation and cessation of hostilities within the resolutions, it rejected accusatory language against Russia. South Africa drafted alternative resolutions that avoided mentioning Russia as an aggressor, calling for peace negotiations and a ceasefire but not for a Russian troop withdrawal (Seekings & Saunders, 2022: 117).

The resolutions were not admitted for official voting and were thus rejected. In official documents, South Africa framed the war not as a case of one-sided violence by Russia against Ukraine. Instead, it used phrases that called upon 'all sides', identifying a two-party conflict that requires 'compromise' (DIRCO, 2022b; Ramaphosa, 2022a). Identifying Russia as an aggressor is seen as not helpful and even unfair. It is not helpful because it can "drive a deeper wedge between the parties", and it is unfair because the causes of the war are supposed to be "related to the security concerns of the parties" (DIRCO, 2022b). In other words, this means the outbreak of the war is not seen as imperial aggression from Russia but as a consequence of Western countries not recognising Russian security concerns over Ukraine. In this context, NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe is seen as having substantially contributed to the war. According to Ramaphosa, "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" (Ramaphosa, 2022b).

The war is not framed as Russia's invasion of Ukraine but as a proxy war in which Ukrainians are instrumentalised by the West. This view culminates in expressing pity for Ukrainians not as victims of Russian domination but of the imperial West, which contributed to the outbreak of the war (DIRCO, 2022c). Furthermore, as the majority of countries in the UNGA favoured a stronger wording against Russia's

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invasion, South Africa accused 'some delegations' of being untruthful to humanitarian concerns and favouring geopolitics (DIRCO, 2022c). When South Africa's position is criticised as siding with an oppressing force instead of the oppressed, the response is tight-lipped (Mills & Hartley, 2022). The standard reply is a reference to Western double standards over interventions in Kosovo 1999, Iraq 2003, Libya 2011, the war in Yemen or the issue of Palestine (Monyela, 2022). The argument is somehow unclear; while South Africa is happy to condemn the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and rightfully calls out double standards, it refuses to condemn similar action by a close political friend while at the same time taking an active side for Western-Saharans against the Moroccan occupiers or Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories (Williams, 2023).

The South African position is problematic for a number of reasons. It nearly uncritically resembles the Russian justification narrative for the invasion, ridicules Ukrainians as mere pawns in a greater chess game of geopolitics and is in contradiction to the country's own stance on supporting a transition to a word order free from hegemonic power.

3 | THE QUAGMIRE OF SOUTH AFRICAN NON-ALIGNMENT

Since the beginning of the war, South Africa has declared its non-alignment position (Ramaphosa, 2023). However, despite the country's insistence on neutrality in the conflict, there have been doubts about how convincing this position is in rhetoric and practice. As some observers found, "Pretoria's definition of non-alignment has acquired an elasticity permitting it to make a series of moves supportive of Russia while continuing to profess its neutrality" (Strategic Comments, 2023).

Support by the Soviet Union for the ANC and its liberation struggle is not forgotten and is often mentioned when explaining the state of South Africa's relations with Russia. Especially within the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) cadres being trained in Moscow left an imprint on South Africa's foreign policy (Shubin, 1996). Consequently, demands for a cooling down, distancing or even condemning Russia were rebuffed. Former foreign minister and ANC Chairperson of the International Relations Sub-Committee, Lindiwe Sisulu, made it clear that "Russia is our friend through and through. We are not about to denounce that relationship that we have always had" (New York Times, 3 March 2022). Similar statements can also be found by the foreign minister, who, at a press conference with Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, in Pretoria, denounced calls for a Russian troop withdrawal as "simplistic" and "infantile" (Fabricius, 2023).

Bilateral relations between Moscow and Pretoria continue to be largely unaffected by the war. While South Africa entertains close relations with a wide set of international actors from both the West and the Global South, relations with Russia are at a different level. In 2013, both countries agreed on a Comprehensive and Strategic Partnership that expands beyond standard formats of cordial diplomatic relations. One passage deserves particular attention. Both parties declare their "Non-participation in any military-political or other alliances, associations or armed conflicts directed against the other Side, or in any treaties, agreements or understandings infringing upon the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity or national security interests of the other Side" (Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2023). This phraseology is usually seen as a non-aggression pact, making sure that neither side is interfering with the interests of the other side and coming close to forming an alliance (Williams, 2023). South Africa's unwillingness to condemn the Russian invasion seems to follow the wording of the agreed partnership.

Furthermore, frequent high-level visits and a joint military naval exercise with Russia and China conducted in South Africa on the anniversary of the invasion cast doubts over South Africa's non-aligned position. In May 2023, an alleged arms shipment to Russia from a South African naval base led to diplomatic tensions with the US. The US Ambassador to South Africa publicly accused South Africa of arming Russia and not being neutral (New York Times, 11 May 2023). However, no evidence of what was loaded on the ship was provided, and South Africa summoned the ambassador and issued its "utter displeasure" with his conduct (DIRCO, 2023). However, the South African response to the accusations is also not unerring. The administration was on the defence, as it could not explain what was transported and why tracking devices had been disabled.

South Africa hosting the BRICS summit in 2023, the first in-person meeting at summit level since the outbreak of Covid-19, also turned out to be no easy diplomatic exercise. As the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Putin, South Africa, as an ICC member, is under a legal obligation to arrest him. Not following the Court's order would either question South Africa's standing as an international law-abiding country or would have politically isolated it within the BRICS group, as it is practically unthinkable that an acting head of state is arrested by a BRICS member hosting the annual summit and having invited Putin to South Africa. The issue was solved by Putin not travelling at that time, most likely because of the mutiny of the Wagner Group only weeks before the summit.

Additionally, the BRICS summit revealed some glaring contradictions in its rhetoric and action, which fall back on its members. At the 14th summit,

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1 year earlier but 4 months into Russia's invasion, the BRICS declared: "We commit to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all States, stress our commitment to the peaceful resolution of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises" (BRICS 14th Summit Declaration 2022, para. 21). One cannot but call this phrasing a double standard. While BRICS countries are quick to reject Western unilateralism and military interventions, often for good reasons, the same standards seem not to apply if one of their members applies neo-imperial politics. While South Africa does not condone Russia's invasion, it also does not condemn it. Lastly, the 2023 summit turned out to be a success for the hosting country. The BRICS agreed to expand their membership from 5 to 11 members, forming an even stronger bloc of non-Western countries, which created significant international media attention, while the issue of Putin not travelling to the summit received far less attention.

In sum, South Africa's approach to the war cannot be described as balanced or neutral. Its understanding of non-alignment displayed tacit support for Russia but not the invasion as such. South Africa systematically mentioned Ukraine's sovereignty rights. The rhetorical framing of the war starkly resembles Russian justification narratives, which blame the West for the war and declare the invasion as an act of just resistance against an unjust and Western-dominated world order. Statements by high-ranking South African officials resonate with this manipulative narrative.

South Africa could reclaim some credibility as a conflict mediator through its role in the African Peace Initiative (API) and the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, both taking place in June and July 2023. The API involved seven African countries, including South Africa, with four heads of state travelling to Russia and Ukraine (Khadiagala, 2023). Central to the initiative was a ten-point peace proposal that focused on conflict mediation and adherence to the UN Charter. It was not endorsed by Russia or Ukraine. The former continued its military campaign to capture more territory; the latter revoked negotiations without Russian troop withdrawal.

At the Russia-Africa Summit, African countries made clear what their priorities were regarding the consequences of the war. "We would like the Black Sea initiative to be implemented and that the Black Sea should be open," Ramaphosa said (Time, 30 July 2023). The Russian–Ukrainian grain deal expired short before the Summit. In response, Russia bombed grain storage facilities in Ukraine and revoked calls for an extension but offered a limited amount of free grain shipments to select countries. Ramaphosa replied by saying: "We are not here to plead for donations for the African continent" (Ibid.).

4 | WORLD ORDER IN TRANSITION

Although the African Peace Initiative and insistence on a continuation of the grain deal did not materialise, the African response to the war contributed to a transition in global order away from traditional centres of power to those of the Global South. Traditionally, African countries have taken an introspective position regarding issues of peace and security, concentrating on the African continent. This has changed; their demands and compositions are now well articulated and underpinned with credible arguments. African agency might not be very powerful, but it is increasingly more visible (Brosig, 2021). However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also polarised the continent, likely also because of the varied consequences (sanctions, inflation, energy and food), the AU has not adopted a common position uniting the continent.

At global scale, South Africa's positioning in the war might not be able to leave a lasting footprint on the global order transition, but it is piece by piece contributing to it. Its position becomes more meaningful also because it reflects those of the current BRICS members which maintain good cordial relations to Russia, not joining sanctions but also not actively endorsing Russian action. Contrary to China or India, South Africa does not display any significant material (economic) dependency on either Russia or Ukraine; thus, its position is more likely to be informed by its ideological focus, framing Russia as a historical friend and strategic partner for transforming the global order but not by the varied direct consequences of the war. South Africa's self-proclaimed non-alignment is punctuated and tends to be supportive of Russia in the end because neutrality on occasions of one-sided aggression rather favours the aggressor. As there is no AU common position, South Africa cannot claim to be a continental leader on the issue. Despite this, it played a central role in the African Peace Initiative and during the Russia–Africa Summit. In the end, with reference to the introduction chapter, South Africa's response to the war falls into two categories of foreign policymaking: the value-driven part and seeking out strategic opportunities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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