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Article

Forum: The Russia–Ukraine War and Reactions from the Global South

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Abstract

The war between Russia and Ukraine has been a topic of interest for scholars and policymakers worldwide. Western countries have condemned and imposed sanctions on Russia, while countries in the Global South have taken varying positions. In this Forum, we will analyse the origins of the war and the responses to it of key countries in the Global South, including China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Iran. The war has multiple causes, and identifying them has implications for understanding what is necessary to regain peace. However, reaching a consensus on its causes will not be easy. Great and middle powers in the Global South have refused to condemn Russia's aggression, at the same time claiming to uphold the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Their positions are shaped by different perspectives and trade-offs between instrumental calculations and normative considerations. The war in Ukraine has brought the issue of global order to the forefront of world politics. It raises the questions of whether the structure of the international system is shifting towards a post-Western order or whether the conflict has strengthened Western domination. Furthermore, countries in the Global South question the legitimacy of certain aspects of the Western-dominated order. By examining the perspectives of the Global South, this Forum may contribute to discussions on the Russia–Ukraine war and the role of the Global South in the shifting global order.

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Introduction: The Russia–Ukraine War and Reactions from the Global South

Vidya Nadkarni

The Russia–Ukraine war, which began on 22 February 2022, has turned into a prolonged conflict with no clear end in sight. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine reinvigorated a flagging North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and elicited the imposition of punitive Western sanctions against Russia, coupled with the West's supply to Ukraine of progressively more sophisticated levels of military assistance. The reactions of countries in the Global South, by contrast, have been more nuanced. None joined in the coordinated sanctions that the West imposed against Russia, and most were measured in both their actions and rhetorical responses to the invasion.

The Global South: Great and Middle Powers

The symposium's essays seek to explain why middle and great powers in the Global South, despite their long-standing support of sovereignty and territorial integrity, refuse unequivocally to either condemn Moscow's invasion of Ukraine or join with the West in sanctioning and isolating Russia. The significance of this collective—but differentiated and uncoordinated—rejection of the Western response calls for deeper examination. A unifying element of responses from middle and great powers in the Global South is their the varying degrees of distrust of the West, and perceptions of Western hypocrisy. A significant contrast is evident in the largely pragmatic nature of the Indian, Chinese, and Iranian responses versus the chiefly ideational foundation of Brazilian and South African reactions. The responses of great and middle powers discussed herein are not necessarily representative of smaller countries within the broad category of the Global South.

Foregrounding this discussion is an analysis of the relative roles of structure and agency in explaining the origins of the war. Geopolitical significance and economic weight guided our choice of which countries in the Global South to focus on.

The positions of *China* and *Iran* on the war must be considered against the backdrop of rising tensions between each state and the West in general and the USA in particular. The USA considers China, a rising great power, as the only competitor with the intent and power "to reshape the international order."[1] Washington hence views China's explicit but qualified support of Russia as evidence of Beijing and Moscow's shared revisionist aspirations to mould the liberal international order into one that conforms more closely to their respective interests and values. In calling for a revised international order, Beijing's primary concern has been to push back against what China sees as US "hegemonism," to eschew Western efforts towards "regime change" and uphold instead the principle of non-interference in the domestic political arrangements of states, and to oppose the use of economic sanctions against other countries as a coercive instrument whereby to achieve the West's political objectives. China's partnership with Russia is framed, in part, by these broader strategic considerations.[2]

The West perceives Iran, an emerging regional power, as a repressive political regime and a disruptive global force. A target of harsh Western sanctions, Iran views a kindred fate in Russia's isolation from the West. Since the start of the Ukraine war, military, economic, and

[1] The White House, "National Security Strategy," 12 October 2022, p. 8, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

[2] Reid Standish, "China Takes Aim at NATO," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 May 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/china-nato-ukraine-war/31845030.html; see also Angela Stent, "China, Russia, and the War in Ukraine," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 28 August 2023, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/china-russia-and-war-ukraine.

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political cooperation between Iran and Russia has surged.[3] Tehran views the rise of China and re-emergence of Russia as significant factors in reshaping the global order. It was in March 2023, when President Xi brokered the onset of a process of rapprochement between the two decades-old adversaries Iran and Saudi Arabia, that China stepped into the fraught world of Middle East diplomacy. Iran's accession to membership of the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July 2023, along with its invitation in 2024 to join the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group, signified growing strategic convergence among China, Iran, and Russia.

China's legitimisation of President Putin, by virtue of President Xi's meetings with him after the war broke out, as well as Iran's material assistance to Russia's war of aggression, represents focal points for Western concern.[4] On 19 February 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said of Chinese leaders that "[p]ublicly, they present themselves as a country striving for peace in Ukraine, but privately…we've already seen over these past months, the provision of non-lethal assistance that does go directly to aiding and abetting Russia's war effort."[5] In response, Wang Wengbin, spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry, criticised the USA for "fanning flames and stoking confrontations" by arming Ukraine and rebuffed such "finger-pointing and even coercion and pressure on China-Russia relations."[6]

Despite pressure from Washington, neither *Brazil, India*, nor *South Africa*, all of which are important democratic partners of the USA, deviated from their studied and independent-minded approach to the war, calling in unison for urgent diplomatic measures to end the hostilities. As emerging economies and members of the BRICS grouping, set up as an alternative to Western-dominated international multilateral organisations, their individual responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine rested on different rationales. Drawing on its international self-identity as mediator, Brazil, despite standing with the West in its condemnation of Moscow's invasion, deviated from the Western position in calling for a ceasefire, in refusing to provide arms to Ukraine, in declining to impose sanctions on Russia, and in its unwillingness to isolate Moscow.

India's hedging strategy evinced fealty to the principle of strategic autonomy and highlighted New Delhi's navigation of a complex geopolitical geometry of balancing ever-strengthening post-Cold War US–India ties against a decades-old "special relationship" with the Soviet Union/Russia and managing US–China competition while preventing escalation of India–China rivalry. New Delhi's nuanced response is in keeping with its strong bid for leadership of countries in the Global South, for which China is a rival contender. At the September 2023 G20 Summit, hosted under India's Presidency, New Delhi successfully shepherded a consensus statement, supported by both Western countries and those of the Global South, which avoided mention of Russia's invasion while simultaneously highlighting the South's concerns regarding the Ukraine war's negative impact on "global food and energy security, supply chains, [and] macro-financial stability."[7] A joint statement from the USA,

[3] Ellie Geranmayeh and Nicole Grawjewski, "Alone Together: How the War in Ukraine Shapes the Russian-Iranian Relationship," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 September 2023, https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-together-how-the-war-in-ukraine-shapes-the-russian-iranian-relationship/.

[4] See, for instance, Thomas Graham, "Putin-Xi Summit Reinforces Anti-U.S. Partnership," *In Brief*, Council on Foreign Relations, 24 March 2023, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/putin-xi-summit-reinforces-anti-us-partnership?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI95vdvbe8ggMVZs7CBB1N5wGxEAAYASAAEgJff_D_BwE.

[5] Quoted in AP News, "Why China's Stand on Russia and Ukraine Is Raising Concerns," *Associated Press*, 20 February 2023, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-government-antony-blinken-china-6ad43aa87f086acce31a1de63c6caf15.

[6] Quoted in AP News, "Why China's Stand on Russia and Ukraine Is Raising Concerns."

[7] G20, "New Delhi Leaders' Declaration," New Delhi, India, 9–10 September 2023, p. 2, https://www.g20.org/content/dam/gtwenty/gtwenty_new/document/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf.

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India, Brazil, and South Africa on using the G20 as a forum wherein to "address global challenges" further underscored New Delhi's diplomatic success.[8]

As with many non-Western states, South African leaders draw upon postcolonial perspectives to inform their country's national interests. The latter's encounter with Western colonialism colours their views on principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, to an extent where the West's call for a principled and unequivocal global response to Russian aggression is seen as hypocritical. As Mark Leonard noted, "…the West's commitment to the principle of sovereignty in Ukraine rings somewhat hollow after years of Western drones patrolling the skies above Pakistan and Afghanistan. Weren't these the same countries that changed international borders in Kosovo, overthrew Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and invaded Iraq?"[9] South Africa hence elected to abstain from the March 2022 United Nations (UN) vote to condemn Russia's invasion. Meanwhile, President Cyril Ramaphosa continues to juggle his country's close ties with Russia and the USA.[10]

Interests and Principles: An Unprovoked and Unjustified War?

Great and middle powers in the Global South tread a complicated path, having refused to condemn Russia's aggression while claiming to uphold the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. One way to explain their starkly different positions on the Ukraine war from those of Western countries is to examine how each group of countries unpacks the concepts of provocation and justification. Although leaders of many states in the Global South see the Russian invasion as unjustified, they nevertheless maintain that it was not unprovoked. The West, on the other hand, sees the Russian aggression as both unprovoked and unjustified.

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Biden characterised the war as an "unprovoked and unjustified attack."[11] The idea of "provocation" is informed by a secular conception of material and geopolitical threats to state interests.[12] The notion of "justification" draws on the principles of *jus ad bellum* (just cause of war) and *jus in bello* (just conduct in war), which, respectively, set out the conditions whereby state sovereignty may be justifiably breached and specifies justifiable behaviour in the prosecution of a war.[13] Neither NATO expansion nor Ukraine's pro-West preferences threatened Russia's security or its interests, according to Western leaders. The concerns that Moscow voiced over both were, in their view, part of a propagandistic justification to mask imperial ambitions. Russia's conduct in the war, moreover, particularly after the March 2022 revelations of civilian atrocities in Bucha, serves as a testament, they argue, to Moscow's utter disregard for international law.[14]

President Putin's characterisation of the cause of the war was captured in his televised address to the Russian people on 24 February 2022, wherein he singled out "the eastward

[8] The White House, "Joint Statement from the United States, India, Brazil, and South Africa on the G20," 9 September 2023, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-india-brazil-and-south-africa-on-the-g20/.

[9] Mark Leonard, "Europe's Self-Destructive Identity Crisis," *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 6 May 2022, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/europes-self-destructive-identity-crisis/.

[10] Catherine Nzuki, "Africa's Peace Delegation: A New Chapter for Africa and the Ukraine War," Commentary, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 16 June 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/africas-peace-delegation-new-chapter-africa-and-ukraine-war.

[11] Joseph R. Biden, "Statement on Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine," The White House, 22 February 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/23/statement-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/.

[12] Richard K. Hermann and Vaughan P. Shannon, "Defending International Norms: The Role of Obligation, Material Interest, and Perception in Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2003), pp. 621–54.

[13] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1977).

[14] Mark F. Cancian, "Putin's Invasion Was Immoral but Not Irrational," Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 May 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/putins-invasion-was-immoral-not-irrational.

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expansion of NATO" as a fundamental threat. Putin noted that any attempt by NATO "to gain a military foothold" in Ukraine represented a red line for Russia. "Russia," he argued, "cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine."[15] China and Iran, in particular, have upheld Russia's contention that the war was provoked by the West. Having refused to recognise formally Russia's annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine, Beijing has nevertheless studiously avoided blaming Russia for the invasion, rather holding steadfastly to the position whereon it was NATO's eastward expansion that provoked Russia's war in Ukraine.[16] Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, laid the blame for the war squarely on the West, declaring that the "roots of the crisis in Ukraine are the US policies that create crisis" and that "Ukraine is one victim of these policies."[17]

Although the countries in the Global South have not specifically pinpointed NATO expansion as a factor, their refusal to condemn Russia implies a certain measure of hesitation in citing the war's causes. However, as regards China and India in particular, their continued strategic engagement with Russia, such as the expression by China's envoy to the European Union (EU) of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, and India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar Subrahmanyam's positioning of India as being "clearly against the conflict in Ukraine" is regarded in certain quarters as diluting their indirect criticism of Russian aggression,[18] hence serving the interests of neither "the participants nor indeed of the international community."[19]

The Endgame: Implications for International Order

The war in Ukraine has led scholars and policymakers alike to query its implications for international order. Two questions in particular are significant. They are (1) Can we see, in the fracturing of responses to the war in Ukraine between the West and the South, the emergence of a post-Western world? and (2) How are countries in the Global South positioned on the question of a potential US–China cold war? Nested within these questions of international order are the role and place of the *Global South* and its utility as a single analytical category.

Countries in the Global South may be unified in their concerns over development, but they vary widely in geopolitical and economic affinities. Using the Ukraine war as a marker, the voting behaviour of African countries was divided down the middle, with half supporting two UN resolutions, in 2022 and 2023, condemning Russia's invasion, and most of the remainder abstaining from the vote.[20] In Asia, only Japan and South Korea joined in the condemnation of Russia's invasion; countries of the Association of South-East Asian

[15] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 24 February 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

[16] Al Jazeera Report, "China Says the US Is the 'Main Instigator' of the War in Ukraine," *Al Jazeera*, 10 August 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/10/china-accuses-us-as-main-instigator-of-the-war-in-ukraine.

[17] Quoted in Garrett Nada, "Iran Blames US, West for Ukraine War," *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, 19 July 2022, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/mar/03/iran-blames-us-west-ukraine-war.

[18] See "Analysis: India Sharpens Stand on Ukraine but Business as Usual with Russia," *Euractiv*, 28 September 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/analysis-india-sharpens-stand-on-ukraine-war-but-business-as-usual-with-russia/.

[19] See Priyanka Shankar, "'Don't See Why Not': China Envoy on Backing Ukraine's 91 Borders," *Al Jazeera*, 27 June 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/27/dont-see-why-not-china-envoy-on-backing-ukraines-91-borders; Jaishankar quoted in Rod McGuirk, "Indian Minister Says Ukraine War Serves No One's Interests," *Associated Press*, 9 October 2022, https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-russia-ukraine-india-australia-82480d79892a76571752111e2390e273.

[20] Nzuki, "Africa's Peace Delegation."

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National did not.[21] Latin American countries adopted varied but lukewarm positions tailored to their individual national interests.[22] Hence, a post-Western world remains incipient. Although the war in Ukraine solidified a uniform Western response (that may be showing signs of weakening), the non-Western world, while refusing to join in, did not mount a unified solidarist front. *Multi-alignment*, or engagement with all centres of power, which has animated the strategic policy choices of most countries in the South, implies a predilection for multipolarity rather than for a bipolar world of US–China competition.[23]

The Russia–Ukraine war, which has exacerbated US–China tensions and cemented an instrumental Russia–China entente, has opened another arena of competition for the USA and China—that of the search for influence in the Global South. Constructive engagement with India may allow the USA to tackle the "grievances and concerns of developing countries" and for the USA to capitalise on India's pragmatic approach to negotiating changes in international economic and financial institutions that support their own "economic growth and development." On the other hand, China's ample resources will serve as a magnet for countries seeking trade and investment.[24]

All wars eventually end in armistices or peace treaties entailing difficult compromises. Whether a settlement will either leave Ukraine a truncated country or Russia a rump and considerably diminished great power remains unresolved.[25] But the war has rendered more urgent the larger issue of the shape of the coming international order. The Russia question (the ramifications of a defeated or strengthened Russia) is entangled with the outcome of US–China hegemonic competition, which is, in turn, affected by Russia–China alignment. Most countries have so far opted to punt on the US–China question, which is as true of US allies as it is of countries in the Global South. As Puglierin and Zerka have stated, "[i]n the years to come, the European Union will likely face difficult strategic decisions: whether to back the United States in its geopolitical competition with China; whether to punish China for its support of Russia; [or] whether to rebuild relations with Russia after the war."[26] Former Indian national security adviser Menon expressed the frustration of countries in the Global South, noting that "for many parts of the globe, a year of war in Ukraine has done less to redefine the world order than to set it further adrift, raising new questions about how urgent transnational challenges can be met."[27]

The shape of the coming international order will hinge partly upon the questions of whether the war continues to polarise Western and non-Western powers and on the eventual outcome of the war and the nature of the armistice or peace agreement that follows.

[21] Stéphanie Fillion, "With Caution and Tact: How Asian Countries Voted on Ukraine at the UN," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 9 February 2023, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/caution-tact-how-asian-countries-voted-ukraine-un.

[22] Ryan C. Berg, et al., "A Hesitant Hemisphere: How Latin America Has Been Shaped by the War in Ukraine," Commentary, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 27 February 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/hesitant-hemisphere-how-latin-america-has-been-shaped-war-ukraine.

[23] Len Ishmael, "The New South in a Multipolar World: Multi-Alignment or Fence Sitting?" Policy Paper 16/23, Policy Center for the New South, October 2023, https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2023-10/PP_16-23_Len%20Ishmael%20VF.pdf. See also, Michael Leigh, "Is Multi-Alignment a Path to Chaos or Order," GIS, 13 November 2023, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/middle-powers-multi-alignment/.

[24] Hung Tran, "Breaking Down China and India's Race to Represent the Global South," Econographics, The Atlantic Council, 20 October 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/breaking-down-china-and-indias-race-to-represent-the-global-south/.

[25] Samuel Charap, "An Unwinnable War: Washington Needs an Endgame in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 5 June 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/unwinnable-war-washington-endgame.

[26] Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 7 June 2023, https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/.

[27] Shivshankar Menon, "Out of Alignment: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Non-Western Powers," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 February 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/out-alignment-war-in-ukraine-non-western-powers-shivshankar-menon.

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The Causes of the Russia–Ukraine War: Multiple Levels of Analysis

Paul D'Anieri, Sydney Kerr, and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova

Why did Russia invade Ukraine? Explaining the war is both an end in itself and a means to the more important ends of understanding how to end war and how to prevent it from recurring. Although, in retrospect, it is tempting to see the invasion as having been inevitable, Russia's invasion of Ukraine caught many experts by surprise. Most observers did not anticipate a major military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, largely because of the imputed irrationality of such an action. The buildup of Russian forces on the borders of Ukraine in April 2021 was an early sign of possible attack, and Putin's July 2021 article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" was a clear statement of imperialist intent.[28] But until Western intelligence agencies began warning of an imminent invasion in December of that year, few thought that Russia would wage a full-scale invasion, and even then, many regarded Russia's actions as a bluff intended to force concessions. Therefore, any analysis of the causes of this war must be prefaced with an understanding that the war's occurrence in 21st century Europe was an extraordinary event that most analysts did not see coming.

Retrospectively, we can examine the role of various causes of this brutal and tragic war. Using the levels-of-analysis framework in Kenneth Waltz's classic book, *Man, State and War*, we investigate in this essay systemic, state/society, and individual-level factors, beginning with the individual, and moving outwards to more permissive factors.[29] Although theories of war focus on a single level of analysis, a thorough account of any particular war will inevitably combine different levels, as Waltz stressed.[30]

Beginning with the individual is appropriate. Over the last two decades, Russia's political system has undergone an evolution towards a de-institutionalised, personalist dictatorship. Given the outsized role of one person in maintaining the system for the benefit of the elite, focusing on Putin and his encircling elite is essential. Agency is clearly observable in this case. Structures, although not insignificant, were far from instrumental in causing this catastrophic war.

Presidential Leadership and the Cognitive-Level Enablers of Russia's Invasion

Individual-level explanations of the war focus on the personality and decision-making of Vladimir Putin. Doing so also implies something about the Russian political system, because to say that a single individual can take a country to war is also to say something about its political system.[31] What Putin is thinking is an individual characteristic. The personalisation of the Russian regime is a state-level characteristic.

Individual leaders—even in democratic states constrained by checks and balances and institutional veto points—play "an independent and systematic role in shaping decisions to intervene" in other states.[32] In personalist dictatorships, such as Russia's in 2022, a leader's role is at least as important as it is in democracies. Stoner is among the many that lay responsibility for the war at Putin's feet, due to his "feckless attempt to rebuild a doomed empire."[33] Liik attributes the decision to invade to Putin's prioritising his "personal obsession" with Ukraine over Russia's national interest.[34]

[28] Vladimir Putin, "On Historical Unity between Russia and Ukraine," 12 July 2021, https://www.prlib.ru/en/article-vladimir-putin-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians.

[29] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1959).

[30] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), pp. 615–28.

[31] Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 18–9.

[32] Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[33] Kathryn Stoner, "The War in Ukraine: How Putin's War in Ukraine Has Ruined Russia," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2022), p. 43.

[34] Kadri Liik, "War of Obsession: Why Putin Is Risking Russia's Future," European Council on Foreign Relations, 25 February 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/war-of-obsession-why-putin-is-risking-russias-future/.

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Putin's role, however, must be viewed in the context of Russia's political regime and the informational and cognitive dynamics underpinning it. Both decisions relating to invading Ukraine—in 2014 and again in 2022—were made behind closed doors, by a very small group in the Kremlin. Such decision-making reflected the personalised nature of Russia's political system, which has degenerated into one whose main function is the preservation of the ruling elites' power.[35] Inter-elite relationships have long revolved around Putin, with different elite groups turning to him for arbitration. Regime personalisation expanded after the 2014 Crimea annexation. The perceived success of the "special operation" catapulted Putin's image from that of the country's president to one of a national hero and saviour personifying national pride and strength.[36]

That small group in the Kremlin, however, underestimated the war's costs. Blattman argues that the decision to start a war can only occur when there are an underestimation of costs and the ability to project these costs onto others.[37] This insight helps to explain the Kremlin's decision to invade. The low-risk assessment results from three factors. First, regime personalisation is associated with the diminished quality of information that the leader receives.[38] An authoritarian leader's need to "coup-proof" their rule forces underlings constantly to demonstrate their loyalty.[39] Demonstrating loyalty entails, rather than offering independent assessments, validating the leader's views. This was palpable in the televised meeting of the Russian Security Council Meeting on 21 February 2022, whose participants looked to be trying to figure out what Putin wanted to hear and then tell him.[40] Kapitonenko specifically invokes Irving Janis' concept of "groupthink" in this respect.[41] Khrushcheva argues that very few people in the Russian leadership were aware of the decision to invade and were hence unable to shape it. As so many Russian officials did not believe that Russia would invade Ukraine, Khrushcheva asserts, they were content to tell Putin what he wanted to hear.[42]

Second, the perceived success of the Crimea operation and the resultant adulation of the president likely emboldened Putin by convincing him that he was on a historical mission to promote Russian greatness.[43] Polling data show that Crimea's annexation reversed a decline in Putin's popularity, taking his ratings to new highs, while opposition to the 2022 invasion

[35] Georgy Egorov and Konstantin Sonin, "Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine? A Theory of Degenerate Autocracy," *BFI Working Paper*, 2023, https://bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/why-did-putin-invade-ukraine-a-theory-of-degenerate-autocracy/; Mario Gilli and Yuan Li, "Selectorate's Information and Dictator's Accountability," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2021), pp. 524–42; Georgy Egorov and Konstantin Sonin, "Dictators and Their Viziers: Endogenizing the Loyalty–Competence Trade-off," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (2011). pp. 903–30.

[36] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020); Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of A Divided Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[37] Christopher Blattman, *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2022); Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov, "Ethnicity as Cognition," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 33 (2004), pp. 31–64.

[38] Egorov and Sonin, "Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine? A Theory of Degenerate Autocracy."

[39] Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[40] Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 278–9; President of Russia, "Security Council Meeting," 21 February 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825.

[41] Mykola Kapitonenko, "Russia's War in Ukraine: How It Started and Where It Could Lead," European Leadership Network, 4 April 2022, https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/russias-war-in-ukraine-how-it-started-and-where-it-could-lead/; Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

[42] Nina Khrushcheva, "The Coup in the Kremlin: How Putin and the Security Services Captured the Russian State," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 May 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-05-10/coup-kremlin.

[43] Alicja Curanović, *The Sense of Mission in Russian Foreign Policy: Destined for Greatness!* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

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remained passive, especially compared to the vocal "milbloggers'" demand that the war be prosecuted with greater determination.[44] Kimmage and Lipman argue that "wartime Putinism" benefitted the regime, even when Russia appeared to be losing the war.[45]

Third, psychological factors may have contributed to Putin's overestimating the ease with which Ukraine could be conquered. Citing Robert Jervis' influential work, Walt argues that Putin's fears led him to underestimate the likely duration and cost of the war and invokes prospect theory to observe that the fear of losses in Ukraine may have made Putin especially risk-acceptant.[46]

Putin appears to be personally invested in nationalist historiography. His writings reveal a vision of Russia–Ukraine relationships based on Russian superiority and the belief that Ukrainian independence is part of a Western plot to weaken Russia.[47] Sasse summarises research showing that imperialist themes became increasingly frequent in Putin's discourse in the lead-up to 2022.[48] Whether Putin's focus is on re-establishing the Soviet Union, or some pre-Soviet version of the Russian empire, remains unclear. Putin, moreover, sees the West, specifically the USA, as an imposer of international rules and norms that go against the wishes of other great powers, namely, Russia and China. Such resentment was clearly evident in Putin's 2007 speech in Munich.[49]

Blattman's insight regarding the capacity to displace the costs of war on to others also applies to Putin's Russia. The war has facilitated the regime's capacity to obliterate dissent and control society. Politically, Putin wins from this war in the short-to-medium term, as long as provisions are made that enable the state to give material support to the poorer segment of the population, while allowing those who disagree to leave the country. The political calculus, therefore, is that the war will prolong Putin's leadership, while its costs are borne out by those who cannot harm the leadership (i.e. the masses).

Ontological Security, Imperial Identity, and the Legacy of the Soviet State

International relations scholars have advanced the concept of ontological security to capture the ideational element of security issues.[50] Scholars define ontological security as a *need* that states must experience themselves as entities with the consistent sense of "self." Ontological security, in their view, rivals military and economic security as a motivator of state behaviour.[51] Ontological security extrapolates from the individual to the state, conceiving of the whole political community as a single actor that reacts to structural factors linked to interstate relationships and specifically to the state's relations with the other (the state's main adversary). Changing hierarchies of power in the international system that are

[44] Levada Centre, "Approval of Institutions, Ratings of Parties and Politicians," 11 April 2022, https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/approval-of-institutions-ratings-of-parties-and-politicians/; Andrei Kolesnikov, "How Russians Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the War: The Pliant Majority Sustaining Putin's Rule," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 February 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-russians-learned-stop-worrying-and-love-war.

[45] Michael Kimmage and Maria Lipman, "Wartime Putinism: What the Disaster in Ukraine Has Done to the Kremlin—and to Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 January 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/wartime-putinism.

[46] Stephen Walt, "An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/.

[47] Taras Kuzio, "Imperial Nationalism as the Driver behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 29 (2023), pp. 30–8.

[48] Gwendolyn Sasse, "Russian Neo-Imperialism: Official Discourse and Domestic Legitimation," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.210669.

[49] Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[50] Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do you Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), pp. 226–55; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (in) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

[51] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics" p. 342; Zarakol, "Ontological (in) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes," p. 3.

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triggered by outcomes of war, processes of decolonisation, and other critical situations create a "radical and unpredictable disjuncture" that culminates in the state of ontological insecurity.[52]

In this view, the Soviet collapse represented such a radical disjuncture and created the conditions for Russia's ontological insecurity. On top of economic and political dislocation in the 1990s, Russia suffered a massive loss of international status. Although the collapse created permissive conditions, leaders still had the agency to choose which conditions to use and which alternative scenarios to pursue. In her book, Sharafutdinova argues that Russia's collective insecurity has been actively constructed and mediated politically in the domestic sphere.[53] Focusing on the construction of the collective trauma during the 1990s, Sharafutdinova highlights the socio-political construction and the role of media and state-controlled propaganda in instilling victimhood-centred narratives in the public sphere.

Theoretically, Russia's elites had the chance, amid economic growth that began in 1999 and lasted until 2013 (excepting the period of the global financial crisis of 2007–08), to frame the 1990s in a different light. Had Putin retained the transition's original liberal goal, the trials and tribulations of the 1990s could have been presented as a "necessary evil" in the quest to attain the stability and growth of the 2000s. Putin's 2000 electoral strategy, however, which political consultants such as Gleb Pavlovsky developed, sought to promote Putin as a leader representing those who lost out during the 1990s' transition that was determined to restore Russia's international status.

That Russia has never been a nation state is a related historical complication. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, it had existed as an imperial state. Centuries of imperialist thinking placed the Russian ethnic group and language at the apex of a social and cultural hierarchy. This imperial heritage has been crucial to the formation of Russia's collective identities. A few scholars have delved into Russia's "internal colonialism" and "subaltern imperial condition,"[54] and over the past decade, growing numbers of them have focused on Russian xenophobia, racism, and nationalism.[55]

The post-Soviet Russia that emerged in 1991 contained the possibility of moving in a non-imperial direction, especially with its asymmetrical and contractual federal arrangements that enabled a high degree of regional autonomy. That trajectory was never fully embraced, however, and by 1993, the imperialist and neofascist Vladimir Zhirinovsky's party had won a plurality of seats in the newly established State Duma. Putin aligned himself with this vision of Russia's future, rather than with Yeltsin's, so rejecting the political pluralism that he associated with a weak state. His programme to rebuild state authority quickly transformed into an agenda of authoritarianism and political centralisation. A strong state and authoritarian regime were justified, in part, by the revival of Russia's imperial agenda, as expressed in the Kremlin's non-recognition of the autonomous agency and sovereignty of its neighbours.

[52] Filip Ejdus, "Critical Situations, Fundamental Questions and Ontological Insecurity in World Politics," *Journal of international Relations and Development*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2018), pp. 883–908; Zarakol, "Ontological (in) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes," pp. 3–23.

[53] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[54] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (New York, NY: Springer, 2015).

[55] Pal Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, *The New Russian Nationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Leonardo Bursztyn, et al., "Social Media and Xenophobia: Evidence from Russia," *Working Paper No. 26567*, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2019; Irina Kuznetsova and John Round, "Postcolonial Migrations in Russia: The Racism, Informality and Discrimination Nexus," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 1/2 (2019), pp. 52–67.

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US Aggression

For Mearsheimer, "The United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis" because NATO expansion in Eastern Europe posed an "existential threat" to Russia.[56] In this view, a combination of the US' misjudgment and aggression put Russia in a position where its security necessitated attacking Ukraine. In Mearsheimer's view, it was defence of the status quo, not aggression or imperialism, that drove Russian policy, the increasingly strident expansionist rhetoric of Russian leaders notwithstanding. Posen similarly claims that "the unwillingness of the United States to consider, let alone concede, a sphere of influence to Russia will likely figure as an important contributing cause of this war."[57] Menon and Ruger assert that NATO expansion was "unnecessary and also contributed to what some have called a second Cold War with Russia," albeit noting that the war had other causes as well.[58] The notion that the USA and NATO are responsible for the war appears to have gained deep resonance in the Global South, where resentment over the legacy of European colonialism and various American misdeeds lends particular credibility to the belief that both must be as responsible for this war as they were for so many others. What seems to Ukrainians, and many others, to be an imperialist war on Russia's part has been successfully presented by Russia as resistance to the very American liberal imperialism that has irked people around the world.

Many analysts take issue with the argument that NATO expansion is at the root of the war, focusing instead on Russia's aims for Ukraine.[59] Although a full critique of Mearsheimer's arguments is beyond the scope of this chapter, D'Anieri has shown that Mearsheimer's arguments in regard to Ukraine contradict his early writings and rely much more on auxiliary assertions about Russia's intentions than on realism.[60] These competing state-level realist arguments are rooted in different assumptions on exactly what the status quo was and, therefore, who disrupted it. By attacking Ukraine, was Russia defending or upending the status quo?

Smith and Dawson deploy "type II neoclassical realism," beginning with systemic and regional factors that created the context for Russian policy and then exploring why Russia chose war from among the other options. They point to the transition in Russia from a "great power pragmatism" to a "new survival paradigm," wherein war became a viable option for Russia after the failure of its attempts to secure Ukraine within its sphere of influence.[61]

Structural Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: What's Globalisation Got to Do with It?

Structural arguments may focus on the politics of insecurity (realism) or on the role of global economics. The focus of system-level realist arguments is on the role of anarchy in international politics. Whether anarchy is merely a permissive cause of war, or is in itself sufficient to cause war, divides "offensive" from "defensive" realists. Applying this distinction to the Russo-Ukrainian war has been complicated by Mearsheimer, the most prominent offensive

[56] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 21 (2022), pp. 12–27; See also John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (2014), p. 77.

[57] Barry Posen, "Hypotheses on the Implications of the Ukraine-Russia War," *Defense Priorities*, 7 June 2022, https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/hypotheses-on-the-implications-of-the-ukraine-russia-war/.

[58] Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment," in James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), p. 168.

[59] Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), pp. 134–5.

[60] Paul D'Anieri, "Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2019), pp. 97–117.

[61] Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson, "Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War," *Analyse & Kritik*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2022), pp. 175–200.

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realist of recent decades, having made arguments in this case which strongly resemble those of defensive realists in attributing the war to the actions of a single state—the USA. Few analysts have invoked system-level factors as playing anything more than a permissive role in causing the war. D'Anieri finds that the security dilemma constrained Russia, Ukraine, and the West and hence that the states had less latitude for action than analysis focusing on lower levels implies.[62]

A different structural argument highlights the role of economic globalisation and Russia's role in the world economy. Russia's economy and hence its politics remain heavily dependent on global energy markets. A long slide in energy prices undermined the country's economy in the late Soviet era and early post-Soviet era. That slide reversed itself around the time Putin came to power, in 2000, when a price boom fed both economic growth and Putin's popularity through to 2014. However, the country's role in the global economy remained limited to that of a massive energy supplier.[63] Russia exported fossil fuels while importing high-tech and consumer products. Given its weak domestic institutions and insecure property rights, billions of dollars left the country to offshore accounts and foreign holdings.[64] The consequent dramatic widening of inequality created fertile conditions for political manipulation of rising popular frustrations. If the war in Ukraine is, in some way, related to and fed by the sense of *ressentiment* shared by large groups in Russian society, one can then argue that the pattern of Russia's integration into the global economy created the conditions for the politics of *ressentiment*. Whether Russia's economic sufferings in the 1990s were due to the West foisting bad economic advice on Russia, to Russia's resistance to necessary reforms, or simply to declining energy prices remains a matter for debate. But within Russia, anti-reformist forces successfully argued that Western models had been disastrous (and were, perhaps, intended to be) and that statism was the solution. One can see how these arguments resonated in the Global South, where statism and import substitution had long been seen as the cure for the perceived ill effects of the Western model. An aggressive foreign policy cannot be attributed to socially shared *ressentiment* because if that were so, the occurrence of wars would be more of a norm than an exception. Such *ressentiment* can, however, provide fertile ground for leaders' calculation of the possible costs of a revanchist foreign policy and public constraints.

The emphasis of this geo-economic argument is on the underlying conditions that helped the Russian leadership to foster and transform domestic resentment into international revanchism. It also explains why the view that the West is as much to blame for the war as is Russia resonates across the Global South. Global markets, moreover, empowered Russian aggression through means very familiar to realists, i.e. by providing the economic resources needed to rebuild the Russian military, thus giving Western European states powerful incentives to appease Russia after the invasion of 2014, rather than to confront it.

Conclusion: From Causes to Solutions?

Identifying the causes of the war has implications for identifying what is necessary for peace and crucially who is responsible for achieving it. This becomes a political question wherein a great deal is at stake, including lives, territory, and principles. However, the pathway from diagnosis to prescription is not as clear-cut as we might hope as the literature on how wars end, which overlaps only in part with that on what causes wars, demonstrates.

[62] D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, pp. 13–4. See also Walt, "An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine."

[63] Clifford G. Gaddy and Barry W. Ickes, "Resource Rents and the Russian Economy," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 46, No.8 (2005), pp. 559–83.

[64] Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015); Gulnaz Sharafutdinova and Karen Dawisha, "The Escape from Institution-building in a Globalized World: Lessons from Russia," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2017), pp. 361–78.

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Whether we attribute Russian aggression to Putin individually or to the Russian state and society has profound implications for the likelihood of enduring peace and the possible paths to it. If Putin alone is to blame for the war, there is no immediate solution, but the longer-term solution is both clear and inevitable. If aggression is more broadly rooted in the Russian political system or the attitudes of the Russian people, however, waiting for Putin's exit will not help.

Identifying the causes of the war is a crucial task for both scholars and policymakers. Agreeing on its causes will not be easy, and although more information, especially from within the Russian government, would help, it will not end the debate. As Waltz showed, where one begins the analysis has an important impact on what one sees. As the debate has so far shown, how one proposes to end the conflict might shape one's understanding of its sources, just as one's understanding of the sources shapes one's plan to end the war.

China's Reaction to the Ukraine War and Its Role Choices in the Global Order

Xiaoyu Pu

As a rising great power with growing influence, China's stance on the Ukraine conflict carries significant weight and implications for the global order. International relations experts have various opinions on whether China has adopted a neutral or a pro-Russia position.[65] This essay examines the Chinese response and places it in a conceptual perspective of international order. China's position on the Ukraine war constitutes a balancing act among competing incentives. The Ukraine conflict has generated discussions about whether the global order is shifting towards a post-Western order or whether Western domination of the order is strengthening.[66] Balance of power and international legitimacy are the two pillars of any international order.[67] As the Chinese actively deliberate the merits of the existing order, Beijing's reaction reflects the contested visions within China to reshape the changing global order.

The Chinese Reaction

China's position on the Ukraine war has been the subject of debate in the international scholarly community. Many experts highlight China's inherent difficulties, describing Beijing's position as one of "irreconcilable choices," a "balancing act," and a "strategic straddle."[68] Some argue that Beijing's position is variable, observing that China seems to be pro-Russia in the diplomatic and informational domains, but self-interested in the economic and military spheres.[69]

China's official narrative emphasises several aspects of the Ukraine conflict. Having expressed its respect for the UN Charter and the principles it embodies of sovereignty and

[65] Zhao Huasheng, "Explaining China's Reaction to the Russia–Ukraine Crisis," *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2023), pp. 24–46; Yan Xuetong, "China's Ukraine Conundrum," *Foreign Affairs*, 2 May 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-02/chinas-ukraine-conundrum; Ashley J. Tellis, "The Ukraine War and Global Cleavages," in Brands Hal, ed., *War in Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), pp. 205–35.

[66] Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016); Matias Spektor, "In Defense of the Fence Sitters," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (2023), pp. 8–16; Stephen Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (2023), pp. 76–91.

[67] Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2015), p. 365.

[68] Evan A. Feigenbaum, "China Faces Irreconcilable Choices on Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 February 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/china-faces-irreconcilable-choices-on-ukraine-pub-86515; Yan, "China's Ukraine Conundrum"; Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Strategic Straddle: Analyzing Beijing's Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 72 (2022), pp. 1–20.

[69] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "China's Response to War in Ukraine," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 62, No. 5/6 (2022), pp. 751–81.

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territorial integrity, Beijing has nevertheless refrained from condemning Russia. Although not necessarily in agreement with Russia's war in Ukraine, certain elements of Beijing's statements echo Russia's position. For example, unlike Western governments, which typically blame Russia as the aggressor, Beijing alludes to the complicated causes of the Ukraine conflict. Asserting that "the legitimate security interests and concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and addressed properly," Beijing calls for "a balanced, effective and sustainable European security architecture."[70] So although Beijing's official policy position is relatively balanced, the messaging of China's propaganda system and media appears somewhat pro-Russia.[71]

China has, amid the West's broadening of its sanctions against Russia, maintained economic, diplomatic, and military ties with Russia. Despite rhetorically opposing sanctions, Beijing's policy behaviour has generally complied with them. In the China–Russia economic relationship, some transactions exist in grey areas under complicated contexts, and certain Chinese companies have sold non-lethal dual-use equipment to Russia.[72] China has not, however, provided Russia with lethal weapons, but the USA nevertheless accuses Beijing of supporting Russia's military industrial base.[73] While disowning any intention of providing military aid to either side of the conflict, Beijing nevertheless asserts that normal trade and economic exchanges between China and Russia should be maintained.[74]

In sustaining its partnership with Russia, Beijing has tried to conduct a relatively balanced diplomacy. China's voting behaviour in the UN largely reflects its position on the Ukraine war, with Beijing having avoided either condemning or directly backing Russia. Since the war began in February 2022, China has abstained on most Ukraine-related UN resolutions.[75] Senior Chinese diplomats, meanwhile, have maintained communications with both their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts. Xi Jinping has also discussed the Ukraine crisis with leaders of such major countries as France, Germany, and Brazil. In February 2023, China released its comprehensive peace proposals,[76] and in April 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping had a phone call with Ukrainian President Zelensky.[77] A month later senior Chinese diplomat Li Hui was appointed as special envoy and visited Ukraine and other countries for in-depth communication with all parties on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.[78] Although China did not attend the Swiss peace summit on Ukraine in June 2024, it endeavoured to enlist certain developing countries to join the six-point peace plan China issued

[70] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," 24 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

[71] Maria Repnikova, "China's Propaganda on the War in Ukraine," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 72 (2022), pp. 1–13.

[72] Courtney Kube, "US Officials Believe China May Be Providing Russia Nonlethal Military Assistance in Ukraine War," *NBC News*, 18 February 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/us-officials-believe-china-may-providing-russia-non-lethal-military-as-rcna71336.

[73] Crispian Balmer, Humeyra Pamuk, and Humeyra Pamuk. "Blinken Says China Is Russia's Primary Military Complex Supplier," *Reuters*, 19 April 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/blinken-says-china-is-russias-primary-military-complex-supplier-2024-04-19/.

[74] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on 23 April 2024," April 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202404/t20240423_11287884.html.

[75] Medeiros, "China's Strategic Straddle."

[76] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis."

[77] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Xi Jinping Speaks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Phone," 26 April 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230426_11066785.html.

[78] Simone McCarthy, "Li Hui: China's Special Envoy Wraps up Two-Day Ukraine Visit as Beijing Attempts to Play Peacemaker," *CNN*, 18 May 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/17/china/china-special-envoy-ukraine-europe-peace-talks-intl-hnk/index.html.

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with Brazil in May 2024.[79] Beijing's joint proposal with Brazil calls for an international peace conference "held at a proper time that is recognised by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties as well as fair discussion of all peace plans."[80]

Above all, in the context of the Ukraine crisis, it is commonly believed that Beijing is adopting either a neutral or a pro-Russia stance. Chinese officials emphasise, however, that they seek to "make an independent judgment based on the merits of the matter itself,"[81] which would imply that Beijing is not taking a conventionally neutral position,[82] but rather emphasising both the immediate cause of the military conflict and the broader conflict between Russia and the West. When it comes to the conflict between Russia and NATO, Beijing demonstrates its understanding of Russia's security concerns in regard to NATO. Beijing, however, does not unequivocally endorse Russia. China has long championed the principle of respecting sovereignty, and Russia's blatant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty is overwhelmingly evident.

Beijing's Calculus

Multiple factors influence Beijing's stance on the Ukraine conflict. China is trying to balance its commitment to uphold the UN charter and its principle of sovereignty, while at the same time maintaining its strategic partnership with Russia and safeguarding its economic ties with the West. Navigating such a complex and challenging international landscape requires a delicate approach.

China has strong incentives to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the UN Charter and the general principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states that it embodies. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), China has a vital responsibility, in the interests of China's international image, to uphold these fundamental principles of international relations. But these fundamental norms are also crucial to Beijing for political reasons. China has always claimed that the preservation of sovereignty is its core interest. Upholding that principle is indeed crucial to the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China.[83] China has hence put the principle of "respecting the sovereignty of all countries" at the head of its 12 proposals for the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.[84]

Beijing, however, has long-term interests in maintaining its strategic partnership with Russia. To attribute any single causal factor to the deepening of the Sino-Russia partnership would hence be fallacious.[85] The China–Russia relationship is based on a common vision of global politics, its focus on constraining US hegemony, shared material interests in regard to trade in energy and military technology, and shared values in regard to the preservation of their domestic political systems. As China and Russia share a long common

[79] Laurie Chen, Liz Lee, and Laurie Chen, "Exclusive: China Pushes Rival Ukraine Peace Plan before Swiss Summit, Diplomats Say," *Reuters*, 14 June 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/china-pushes-rival-ukraine-peace-plan-before-swiss-summit-diplomats-say-2024-06-13/.

[80] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Common Understandings Between China and Brazil on Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," 23 May 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/ldmzs_664952/xwlb_664954/202405/t20240523_11310698.html.

[81] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on 24 February 2022," 24 February 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202202/t20220224_10645282.html.

[82] For a nuanced interpretation of why Beijing's position is different from that of neutrality, see Zhao, "Explaining China's Reaction to the Russia–Ukraine Crisis."

[83] Medeiros, "China's Strategic Straddle."

[84] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis."

[85] Brandon K. Yoder, "International Relations Theory and the Puzzle of China-Russia Alignment," in Brandon K. Yoder, ed., *The United States and Contemporary China-Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 1–26.

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border, moreover, maintaining a peaceful and cooperative relationship is crucial for both countries. Although Beijing might not agree with Russia's military actions, China would not want to see Putin's regime defeated, let alone overthrown. During Xi Jinping's state visit to Russia in 2023, the Russian and Chinese governments released a joint statement asserting that "Russia needs a prosperous and stable China, and China needs a strong and successful Russia."[86]

Intensified US–China rivalry has driven the partnership between China and Russia. The United States increasingly views China as a revisionist power that seeks to fundamentally challenge the so-called rules-based international order.[87] Having identified Russia as an immediate threat to regional security in Europe, the Biden administration singles China out as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."[88] The partnership between China and Russia has strengthened in multiple areas, which include the growing bilateral trade, joint military exercises, and frequent summit meetings between Xi Jinping and Putin.[89]

Although Beijing seeks to maintain its partnership with Russia, Sino-Russia alignment differs from a traditional military alliance.[90] China and Russia each have reasons to maintain strategic autonomy even as they maintain cooperation in certain policy domains.[91] A deep social and economic foundation remains absent from the Sino-Russian alignment, and there is mistrust between the two countries due to historical as well as contemporary problems. The Sino-Soviet split in the early Cold War era, for example, still shadows contemporary thinking in China.[92]

Beijing's ties with the West face growing challenges, and China's stabilisation of its relationship with Europe and the USA remains crucial. Economic ties with the West, therefore, are an essential consideration in China's approach to the Ukraine war because the EU and the USA are two of China's most important trading partners. Having long seen Europe as a swing vote in the global balance of power, China has sought to prevent the EU from overtly aligning against the country.[93]

Above all, its variance from the Western perspective notwithstanding, Beijing's position also differs from that of Moscow. Beijing's voting behaviour in the UN is relatively balanced. While maintaining economic and military ties with Russia, Beijing has tried to avoid becoming the target of Western sanctions and has not provided Russia with lethal weapons. China has also promoted its own peace plan.

[86] Presidential Office of the Russian Federation, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," 14 February 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67712.

[87] The White House, "National Security Strategy 2022."

[88] The White House, "National Security Strategy 2022," p. 23.

[89] Alexander Gabuev, "What's Really Going on Between Russia and China," *Foreign Affairs*, 12 April 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/whats-really-going-between-russia-and-china; Alexander Gabuev, "Putin and Xi's Unholy Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/putin-and-xis-unholy-alliance.

[90] Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Sino-Russian Military Alignment and Its Implications for Global Security," *Security Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2024), pp. 254–90.

[91] Igor Denisov, "'No Limits'? Understanding China's Engagement With Russia on Ukraine," *Diplomat*, 24 March 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/no-limits-understanding-chinas-engagement-with-russia-on-ukraine/.

[92] Nien-Chung Chang-Liao, "The Limits of Strategic Partnerships: Implications for China's Role in the Russia-Ukraine War," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 10 February 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260.2023.2174702; Patricia M. Kim, "The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (2023), pp. 94–105.

[93] Yong Deng, *China's Strategic Opportunity* (Cambridge/New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 178–206; Na Yang, "How China Perceives European Strategic Autonomy: Asymmetric Expectations and Pragmatic Engagement," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2023), pp. 482–505.

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China's Role Choices in the Shifting Global Order

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has brought the issue of global order to the forefront of international politics, triggering a new round of reflections on that order's nature.[94] Is the global order shifting toward a post-Western world? Or has the Ukraine war strengthened Western domination of the global order? Is the current global order largely legitimate?

The Ukraine war has reignited debates about China's role choices in the shifting global order. Western policy elites tend to see China and Russia as authoritarian great powers similarly bent on fundamentally challenging the liberal international order even though China and Russia have, in the main, adopted different approaches in that regard.[95] A rising China prefers an incremental approach to reforming the existing order, while a declining Russia is more inclined to launch desperate challenges against it. China's role choices in the international order are thus more nuanced and complicated than the mainstream US policy narrative assumes.

As China's policy and intellectual communities are not monolithic, there are hence competing visions of international order within China.[96] China's political and intellectual elites, including China's top "Russia watchers," have made an explicit connection between the Ukraine conflict and the shifting global order.[97] China's foreign policy experts actively evaluate the impact of the Ukraine war and its implications for China's choices amid the changing global order.[98] From a theoretical perspective, legitimacy and power are the two key pillars of international order. According to Kissinger, "Every international order must sooner or later face the impact of two tendencies challenging its cohesion: either a redefinition of legitimacy or a significant shift in the balance of power."[99] Depending on how the Chinese think about international legitimacy and power balance, there are four ideal types of international order wherein China can play a different role. The first vision sees China embracing the delegitimisation of the West-led order by functioning as a spoiler and new leader with an alternative view of how the world should be structured.[100] The second vision assumes China's possible emergence as a supporter of the existing order. This approach would involve China's acceptance of the legitimacy of the global order and working to maintain stability and cooperation within the system.[101] The third vision assumes China's role as a shirker, prioritising domestic policies while shaping incremental change

[94] Some suggest that international positioning on the Ukraine conflict reflects diverse visions of international order. See Ashley J.Tellis, "The Ukraine War and Global Cleavages." This essay focuses on the connection between competing visions of international order in China and China's role choices in the Ukraine conflict.

[95] Andrej Krickovic, "The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership: Cautious Riser and Desperate Challenger," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2017), pp. 299–329.

[96] Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of US Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), pp. 41–72; Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, "Rethinking China's Rise: Chinese Scholars Debate Strategic Overstretch," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (2018), pp. 1019–35; Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, "Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 635–64.

[97] Feng Yujun, "The Post-Russia-Ukraine Conflict World: Not a 'Splitting into Camps,' but Rather a 'Small Divergence'," *Interpret: China*, CSIS, 22 July 2022, https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-post-russia-ukraine-conflict-world-not-a-splitting-into-camps-but-rather-a-small-divergence/; Feng Yujun. "Russia Is Sure to Lose in Ukraine, Reckons a Chinese Expert on Russia," *The Economist*, 11 April 2024. https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/04/11/russia-is-sure-to-lose-in-ukraine-reckons-a-chinese-expert-on-russia; Feng Shaolei, "The Prospects of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Dealing with New Problems," *Guancha*, 21 March 2023, https://www.guancha.cn/FengShaoLei/2023_03_21_684900.shtml.

[98] Bonny Lin and Brian Hart, "Accelerating Profound Changes Unseen in a Century: Chinese Assessments of and Responses to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," in Brands Hal, ed., *War in Ukraine*, pp. 239–57.

[99] Kissinger, *World Order*, p. 365.

[100] Schweller and Pu, "After Unipolarity"; William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2008), pp. 749–61.

[101] G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (2008), pp. 23–37.

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in the existing order.[102] Finally, China could appear as a facilitative co-leader, not eager to replace the USA as a new global leader, but rather more active in contributing to international public goods.[103] Emphasising a collective rather than hegemonic leadership role, this approach would involve China's working with other major powers to address international challenges.

The four visions of international order and China's corresponding role choices are ideal types. In reality, China's foreign policy might reflect different roles in various domains. China's official position on the Ukraine war seems to reflect a contradictory combination of a shirker role and a co-leader role. China's foreign policy has traditionally emphasised a low-profile approach whereby to avoid risks and unwanted responsibilities. Although Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive under Xi Jinping's leadership, the traditional emphasis on risk avoidance still influences China's reactions to the Ukraine war. Chinese officials reiterate time and again that China is not a party to the Ukraine crisis[104] and that China's policy behaviour has been prudent. Moreover, although avoiding risks, China seems willing to take a co-leader role in addressing regional and global challenges. As to the Ukraine conflict, Beijing cannot avoid shouldering such responsibilities as facilitating political negotiation through multilateral channels.

As great power rivalry intensifies, rising political and security tensions have a greater negative impact on economic and technological ties in international relations. In recent years, the USA has demonstrated its potential weaponising of economic ties in order to coerce non-Western powers.[105] The Ukraine conflict vividly illustrates this prospect. Although rejecting the simplistic analogy of "today's Ukraine, tomorrow's Taiwan," Beijing must nevertheless think hard about how it may cope with the scenario wherein China becomes the target of Western sanctions triggered by a military conflict over Taiwan. Xi Jinping has offered China's Global Security Initiative as a counter-narrative aimed at delegitimising the US security framework.[106] China has also further promoted the internationalisation of the Chinese currency.[107] Chinese discourse and policy behaviour hence reflect a tendency to delegitimise the American-led order and provide an alternative vision of order. Some Chinese analysts suggest that China may learn from Russia how best to cope with Western sanctions.[108]

In contrast to the vision of promoting an alternative post-Western order, some Chinese experts hold that China should give serious consideration to abandoning Putin's Russia. Immediately after the war started in 2022, Shanghai-based political scientist Hu Wei wrote an essay advocating such a perspective.[109] According to Hu, the war would likely weaken both Putin and Russia, while strengthening US international leadership and the Western alliance. China, therefore, should join the "mainstream" position of the West, thus breaking away from Putin and giving up neutrality.[110] Hu's analysis seems to recommend China's playing a supporter role but at the same time to avoid being isolated by the West. Although

[102] Schweller and Pu, "After Unipolarity"; Weiss and Wallace, "Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order."

[103] Zhimin Chen, Guorong Zhou, and Shichen Wang, "Facilitative Leadership and China's New Role in the World," *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2018), pp. 10–27.

[104] Stuart Lau, "China Insists It's 'Not a Party' to Russia's War with Ukraine," *POLITICO*, 14 March 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/china-is-not-party-russia-war-on-ukraine-foreign-minister/.

[105] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019), pp. 42–79.

[106] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Xi Jinping's Quest for Order: Security at Home, Influence Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 October 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/xi-jinping-quest-order.

[107] Jing Shi, "Yuan's Global March Gathers Momentum," *China Daily*, 10 April 2023, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202305/08/WS64584cc7a310b6054fad190c.html.

[108] TASS, "World Should Learn from Russia How to Cope with Western Sanctions—Chinese Expert," 24 November 2023, https://tass.com/economy/1711293.

[109] Hu Wei, "Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China's Choice," US China Perception Monitor, Carter Centre, 12 March 2022, https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/.

[110] Ibid.

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not representative of the official Chinese position, Hu's voice nevertheless presents an important perspective within China's policy and intellectual communities. Certain other experts in China share, to some extent, Hu's view. Feng Yujun, one of China's leading Russia experts, appears to regard Moscow as having lost politically, economically, and diplomatically, no matter what happens on the battlefield.[111]

The Ukraine conflict thus has significant implications for China's role in the shifting order. China must navigate complex geopolitical dynamics in its quest to balance its strategic interests and maintain stability in the international order. The Chinese are hence actively deliberating the merits of the current international order and China's role choices. Some argue that the current order is fundamentally flawed and requires a major overhaul, and China must prepare for an alternative world order.[112] However, others assume that the current order is resilient and largely legitimate, and it is more realistic to pursue incremental reforms of the current order. From this perspective, Beijing should distance itself from Russia while building a better relationship with the West.[113] China's official policy, however, reflects a mix of the shirker and co-leader roles. China wants to avoid the problems and negative ramifications of the Ukraine conflict, having repeatedly emphasised that it is not a party to the conflict. But China is also interested in co-managing these problems with other major world powers.

Conclusion

China's reaction to the Ukraine War has significant implications for the global order. While emphasising its commitment to the principles of the UN Charter and sovereignty, China has refrained from condemning Russia. Indeed, some of China's messaging partially echoes Russia's talking points. China's perspective differs from that of the West, but nor does it entirely align with Moscow's. China's voting behaviour in the UN has been cautious, with the country having mostly abstained from Ukraine-related resolutions. Beijing has sought to maintain its ties with Russia, but China is yet to cross any of the West's red lines and has not provided lethal weapons to support Russia. China has, moreover, presented its own peace proposals.

Beijing's stance is influenced by a wide range of factors, not least among them its commitment to the UN Charter and the principle of sovereignty. Both China and Russia have incentives to maintain their strategic partnership. But China also values its relationship with Europe and the USA and cannot afford to alienate these two important trading partners. Beijing still regards Europe as a "swing state" with which it should cultivate strong relations.

The Ukraine conflict has engendered strategic uncertainty wherein questions have been raised about whether it has precipitated a shift towards a post-Western order or bolstered Western domination of the order. China's reaction to the Ukraine conflict reflects its contested visions to reshape the international system. As China navigates complex geopolitical dynamics, Chinese elites actively debate the merits of the current international order and China's role choices amid the shifting global order. This state of flux implies that the choices Beijing makes in the coming years will have far-reaching implications for the global order.

[111] Feng, "The Post-Russia-Ukraine Conflict World"; Feng, "Russia Is Sure to Lose in Ukraine, Reckons a Chinese Expert on Russia."

[112] TASS, "World Should Learn from Russia How to Cope with Western Sanctions."

[113] Hu, "Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China's Choice"; Feng, "Russia Is Sure to Lose in Ukraine, Reckons a Chinese Expert on Russia."

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India's Regional Geopolitics, Global Worldviews, and Ukraine: "Everything, Everywhere, All at Once"

Deepa M. Ollapally

Introduction

Despite intense pressure from its Western partners and Japan, India's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been unwavering. The reputational costs of democratic India's support for Russian aggression against a small sovereign state, the diplomatic cost of countervailing the strong preference of close friends, and the strategic costs of breaking rank and becoming an unreliable ally in the security arena should have all stacked the deck towards a different foreign policy choice by India. Yet, as the war drags on, there is little sign of change. Indeed, India has struck and stuck to its own path, much to the consternation of the USA and its allies.[114] How may we understand Indian behaviour?

If, as neo-realism would suggest, strategic threats are the main driver of a state's foreign policy, we should expect India to tighten its ties and join forces, at least diplomatically, with like-minded partners at this critical moment. After all, the strong convergence over the past 5 years with its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners Japan, the USA, and Australia on China's challenge in the Indo-Pacific is unmistakable. Since the deadly 2020 Sino-Indian border clash, moreover, India's security concerns regarding Beijing have only hardened. We are indeed witnessing a systemic geopolitical realignment as a historic Russian–Chinese partnership takes hold—one that could be highly detrimental to Indian security interests. Neorealist logic would posit that the prevailing distribution of power should have led India to side with the USA on Ukraine. Yet, India has instead backtracked to its earlier strategic autonomy preferences, leaving it somewhat isolated. From a systems perspective, India's decision to refrain from condemning Russia is puzzling, which brings us to the main question this Forum is addressing.

Did New Delhi make a strategic blunder in not aligning more closely with the West, instead banking on the continuance of Russia's past support in the future? I consider this proposition and suggest that India's choice is driven by a strategic rationale, but one that is more regionally specific and which best fits its own historically conditioned identity.

Having It Both Ways on the Ukraine War

Russia's full-on invasion of Ukraine created a quandary for Indian foreign policymakers. Moscow has been a highly regarded diplomatic and defence partner of India for decades. Relations between India and Ukraine have also been excellent, with nearly 20,000 Indian students studying there. On the other hand, the so-called Quad has, since its relaunch in 2017, become India's main Indo-Pacific "strategy" to counter China.

As such, that India should try to have it both ways comes as no surprise. The subcontinent has abstained from every UN resolution denouncing Russia, as was also the case in late 2023 on the question of electing Russia to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).[115] Meanwhile, in practice, India and China have been on the same side regarding votes and sanctions against Russia.

India is the only major power to have membership in organisations that are generally seen as competitive, even adversarial. Since the war broke out, India has maintained its regular attendance at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, promoted by China and Russia; of

[114] Deepa Ollapally, "India Goes Its Own Way on Global Geopolitics," *East Asia Forum*, 22 September 2022, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/22/india-goes-its-own-way-on-global-geopolitics/.

[115] Rezaul Laskar, "India Explains Why It Abstained at UN Vote on Ukraine with 3 Piercing Questions," *Hindustan Times*, 25 February 2023, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-explains-why-it-abstained-at-un-vote-on-ukraine-with-3-piercing-questions-101677253567257.html; The Wire Staff, "India Abstains from UNHRC Vote That Extended Term of Special Rapporteur on Russia," *The Wire*, 13 October 2023, https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-abstain-unhrc-vote-extend-term-special-rapporteur-russia.

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Vostok military exercises, hosted by Russia; and the BRICS Summit, hosted by Beijing.[116] India has also maintained a steady stream of summits with Quad and other Western leaders. So far, India's balancing act between Russia and the West has paid off. The flurry of high-level visitors to New Delhi within a 2-month span after the invasion established a pattern that has persisted, so attesting to India's value. For all its ambivalence, therefore, India appears to be in a "sweet spot."[117]

Explanations for India's Neutral Policy: Beyond Leadership and Domestic Compulsions

How may we theoretically characterise Indian ambivalence in international relations? In applying a three-level Waltzian approach, I suggest that domestic state–society relations and leadership factors are not important drivers of India's decision to maintain its backing for Russia.[118] The systemic lens is the most useful, but I make two caveats. First, the focus on the global stage needs to be reoriented towards the regional level. Second, the neorealist logic of either balancing or bandwagoning is too limiting. Instead, we may see Indian behaviour more as hedging. Hedging is essentially an insurance policy or a risk reduction strategy under conditions of high uncertainty.[119] It is usually adopted by smaller powers that are reluctant to choose between two rival big powers, so India constitutes an exception. To understand big power India's type of hedging, we need to add another dimension—one involving worldviews or identity that a strictly international system approach does not capture.

Beyond Leadership

There are few in the Indian strategic community or foreign policy establishment that differ significantly from the government's current approach to Russia. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi does have his own particularistic approach to the Ukraine war, it is hard to perceive what is distinct about it.

Narendra Modi's own popularity ratings have been nothing short of remarkable. At 76%, his current approval rating puts him in top position of democratic leaders globally.[120] Although the June 2024 election result implies a dent in his image of invincibility, Modi's dominance as a political leader nevertheless remains intact. Such popular support is due, in part, to his image as a tough and bold actor at home and abroad. As this has given him wide latitude in policy-making, it is safe to say that almost any decision the Prime Minister took on Ukraine and Russia would have withstood opposition.

Beyond Domestic Compulsions

But what about India's domestic compulsions? The war and consequent sanctions, causing a rapid spike in energy and food prices, had huge negative economic impact on India. The Indian leadership's decision to accept Russia's offer of oil at an impressive discount of up to 30% led to the attempted "soft public shaming" by certain Western officials and commentators, who suggested that India was funding Vladimir Putin's war machine.

Arguably, India's need for critical supplies from Russia—like oil, coal, and fertilisers—to protect domestic post-pandemic recovery could play a role in its stance on Russia. But if this was the sole impetus, India could have adopted a more "transactional" outlook simply by

[116] Rising Powers Initiative, "A Tale of Two Indias? China and India from Hambantota to Vostok," 8 September 2022, https://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/publication/a-tale-of-two-indias-china-and-india-from-hambantota-to-vostok/.

[117] Ravi Buddhavarapu, "India Is in a Sweet Spot, Courted by the Quad, China and Russia," *CNBC*, 13 September 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/24/india-is-in-a-sweet-spot-courted-by-the-quad-china-and-russia.html.

[118] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

[119] Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Shades of Grey: Riskification and Hedging in the Indo-Pacific," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (2023), pp. 1181–214.

[120] Peyton Shelburne, "Global Leader Approval Rating," *Morning Consult Pro*, 14 December 2023, https://morningconsult.com/global-leader-approval/.

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accepting the cheap deals while upholding a more forceful diplomatic position against the invasion. India's imports from Russia have risen dramatically since that event, largely due to a nearly 400-fold increase in its oil purchases.[121] However, as Russia is highly dependent on both China and India as customers, a stronger rebuke from New Delhi would not have imperilled its business with Russia.

Therefore, neither the domestic nor leadership levels offer a satisfactory explanation for India's neutral position. So how well does the third system-level theory hold?

The Systems Impact and India's Regional Security Calculus

As a Big Power, India Is Not above "Hedging"

Some scholars have recently suggested that the Global South, including large countries like India, is hedging between the USA and Russia on Ukraine as a kind of insurance and to gain greater global manoeuvring room by playing one great power against the other.[122] I argue that India's hedging needs to be understood as more than just an insurance policy for the sake of security or a means to play one power against the other. India's position is more than instrumental in being intrinsically tied to its sense of international identity and worldview.

In safeguarding its security, what does India's hedging look like? India is essentially hedging against China, but stops short of outright balancing, and, although hedging with Russia, is hardly bandwagoning. Although some have referred to the former as "evasive balancing" against China, the point is that such evasiveness in itself proves that India is hedging,[123] which, likewise with notions of "zone balancing," is less costly and risky.[124] Interestingly, neither proponent sees either evasive or zone balancing as effective, which suggests that it is perhaps best to hedge after all. Since the mid-2000s, India has—gingerly—been using Russia as well as the USA to hedge against China. New Delhi thus sought to keep its relations with Moscow stronger than between the latter and Beijing. These hedging strategies can be explained as relatively cost effective and less risky in protecting India's national security interests, especially at the regional level.

The US–India convergence over an increasingly assertive China, however, never extended to Russia. Washington's propensity to group China and Russia together as an "authoritarian axis" threatening the global liberal order, even before the Ukraine war, found no resonance in New Delhi. The reality was that American and Indian threat perceptions may have converged in the Indo-Pacific region, but diverged in the global context. As Walt notes, when a state chooses to balance or bandwagon, "threat perceptions" often matter more than just the distribution of capabilities.[125]

Despite New Delhi's arms diversification efforts over the past decade, Russia still accounts for nearly 60% of its supply.[126] In 2022, India went ahead, under the threat of US sanctions, with its order of Russian S-400 missile systems, one that gives India crucial strategic deterrence against China and Pakistan, and hence it was hardly willing to

[121] Mohamed Zeeshan, "Is a New Russia-China-India Bloc Forming in the East?" *The Diplomat*, 4 April 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/is-a-new-russia-china-india-bloc-forming-in-the-east/.

[122] Matias Spektor, "In Defense of the Fence Sitters," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (2023), p. 8. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/global-south-defense-fence-sitters.

[123] Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive Balancing: India's Unviable Indo-Pacific Strategy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (2020), pp. 76–7.

[124] Arzan Tarapore, "Zone Balancing: India and the Quad's New Strategic Logic," *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2023), pp. 239–40.

[125] Stephen Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1985), pp. 3–43.

[126] Krishn Kaushik, "Explained: How Dependent Is India on Russia's Weapons?" *The Indian Express*, 3 March 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-russia-military-weapons-defence-ties-7795804/.

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forgo. Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia was "respectful" of Indian aspirations to diversify military equipment and technology.[127] This suggests that Russia values India as more than just an export partner and that relations will not be compromised by growing Indian reliance on Western technology and indigenous weaponry.

Hedging and a studied ambivalence also happen to fit best with India's worldview and international identity.[128] This is where the big power India hedging differs from that of small and medium states. India's obsession with strategic autonomy and preference for multipolarity emanate from a deep-seated sense of civilisational self-awareness, as well as colonial humiliation. At a meeting, soon after the invasion, with the then UK Foreign Minister Liz Truss, her Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar noted that the global economic rebalancing over past decades that translated into a more multipolar world had led to the replacement of the G7's centrality with that of the G20. He bluntly observed the result as more countries "who have views and influence on how the world should be run."[129] To suggest that India's historical identity does not matter, therefore, is breathtakingly presumptuous.

Will India's Decision Calculus Change?

That said, exactly how tenable is India's so-called "sweet spot"? Since the beginning of the war, India's big worry has been whether China, its regional rival, will emerge as the real winner. Strategist Mohan has already concluded that Putin's misadventure, and the growingly unequal Sino-Russian alliance will make Moscow much more beholden to China, which is "not a nice place for Delhi to be in."[130] His conclusion, of course, presumes the worst case scenario for India: an emboldened China that will put more military pressure on the Himalayan border, a China that gets veto power over Russian arms transfers to India, a more positive reorientation of Moscow's relations towards Pakistan, and the loss of strategic trust in India by Quad countries that feel let down.

There are, however, countervailing factors that could forestall such an outcome. Indian policymakers seem to be betting that Russian nationalism will ultimately prevent Moscow from relinquishing its great power identity to become a Chinese underling. Even critics in India and the USA concede that, given Russia's geographic size, natural and human resources, and military and nuclear capability, "it is hard for Russia to not be a great power"[131] and that even a defeat in Ukraine would be only a temporary setback.[132] That Putin does not worry about China's possible exploitation of Russian weaknesses to extract deals that were earlier unthinkable, for example, in the sensitive Far East, seems highly unlikely.[133] So would Moscow want to put all its eggs in the China basket?

There is little reason why Russia should not continue to value India's prized independence, which fits Moscow's own preferred multipolar world. Although India cannot offer an alternative to China's capital and markets, which Russia will need more than ever, New Delhi has now demonstrated the value of both its purchasing power and diplomatic finesse.

[127] Rahul Bedi, "What Jaishankar's Russia Visit Tells Us," *The Wire*, 29 December 2023, https://thewire.in/security/jaishankar-russia-materiel-defence.

[128] Deepa Ollapally and Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India: Foreign Policy Perspectives of an Ambiguous Power," in Henry Nau and Deepa Ollapally, eds., *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 73–89.

[129] Patrick Wintour, "India Defends Buying Discounted Russian Oil Despite Appeal by Truss," *The Guardian*, 31 March 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/india-defends-buying-discounted-russian-oil-despite-appeal-by-truss.

[130] C. Raja Mohan, "A New Sino-Russian Alliance," *The Indian Express*, 4 February 2023, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-new-sino-russian-alliance-what-are-its-implications-for-india-8416119/.

[131] Max Bergmann, "Russia's Coming Great Power Struggle," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 12 May 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-coming-great-power-struggle.

[132] Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Four Implications of a Russian Defeat in Ukraine," *The Print*, 16 September 2022, https://theprint.in/opinion/four-implications-of-a-russian-defeat-in-ukraine-one-affects-india-the-most/1130379/.

[133] Thomas Lynch, "Can the West Manage Russia's Decline?" *The National Interest*, 29 October 2022, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-west-manage-russia%E2%80%99s-decline-205583.

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Trade ministers from Russia and India announced in April 2023 that they are engaging in advanced talks about a new free trade agreement (FTA). Russia has neatly avoided condemnation at the G20 meetings this year, with India as the president. At the 2022 Quad summit, the word "invasion" in the joint declaration's reference to Ukraine was, under Indian persuasion, replaced with "conflict."[134] Looking to the future, therefore, why would Russia itself not want a hedge with India?

Russia's cooperation with China might well be limited to an anti-Western front, leaving aside the Indo-Pacific. Putin's successful visit to Vietnam in June 2024 was a signal that Russia's own interests in Asia was not just China oriented.[135] The extreme case of a Russia–China–Pakistan combination would be devastating for India, but that Moscow would choose to tilt towards a financially strapped Pakistan perennially mired in domestic controversies is almost unimaginable. India's security concerns lie squarely in its own neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region, places wherein Russia is least likely to follow Chinese dictates. There is also faint hope that Russia may be able to persuade China that, from a self-interested view, an anti-West front would be more feasible if India were not decisively pushed into the American orbit.[136]

Conclusion: India as "Everything Everywhere, All at Once"

Even if India is presented with some version of a worst case scenario, that it will be blindsided or isolated is hardly likely. Its relationship with the Quad countries is still very much on track, and India's importance to its partners cannot be understated: after all, there is no Indo-Pacific without India. If anything, others are becoming increasingly "socialised" into India's strategic unwillingness to balance or bandwagon and its historically conditioned style of big power hedging.

Indian ambivalence will not change unless triggered by a clear change in threat perception and security risks. There are signs that, despite New Delhi's outward confidence, there are concern and scepticism as to how much help India can expect from Russia in regard to China. India's Chief of Defence Staff Anil Chauhan has remarked that Russia is a declining power and that its importance will wane.[137] He moreover flagged the growing power of China. Even the convergent Indian and Russian worldviews on multipolarity are under some pressure. According to a former Indian foreign secretary, there are many valid reasons for "India [to] bat[s] for multipolarity."[138] But the emerging multipolarity does not resemble a classic version of multiple, relatively equal big powers. A type of "uneven multipolarity," where neither India nor Russia come anywhere near to matching the USA and China, could constrain India to tilt more heavily towards the USA and away from Russia.[139] India's decision in March 2024 to stop accepting discounted Russian oil delivered by Russian company Sovcomflot that has been sanctioned by the USA comes as a potential blow to Moscow's economy and a recalibration.[140]

[134] Abe Ryutaro, "Quad Joint Statement Avoids Any Mention of Russia, China," *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 March 2022 https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14629561.

[135] Khanh Vu and Minh Nguyen, "Visiting Vietnam, Putin Seeks a New 'Security Architecture' for Asia," *Reuters*, 20 June 2024 https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-president-putin-arrives-vietnam-state-visit-2024-06-19/.

[136] Zeeshan, "Is a New Russia-China-India Bloc Forming in the East?"

[137] Aksheev Thakur, "World will Witness an Assertive China but Russia's Importance will Wane," *Indian Express*, 15 October 2023 https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/world-will-witness-assertive-china-russias-importance-will-wane-cds-general-8983198/.

[138] Kanwal Sibal, "Why India Must Not Join the West in Demonizing Russia," *India Narrative*, 11 September 2022, https://www.indianarrative.com/opinion-news/why-india-must-not-join-the-west-in-demonising-russia-48224.html.

[139] Nivedita Kapoor, "Multi-alignment under 'Uneven Multipolarity': India's Relations with Russia in an Evolving World Order," *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, Vol 16, No. 2 (2023), p. 24.

[140] Siladitya Ray, "India Stops Buying Russian Oil Delivered by US-Sanctioned Tankers," *Forbes*, 22 March 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2024/03/22/india-stops-accepting-russian-oil-delivered-by-us-sanctioned-tankers-reports-say/.

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All said and done, internal balancing, i.e. self-strengthening, is the most dependable security strategy for a large power like India. This would safeguard security and strategic autonomy, but going it alone is an expense that India still cannot afford. New Delhi's security concerns happen to be regionally based, whereas its identity construct is global. Within this more limited security outlook, India's current hedging is so far allowing it to be "everything everywhere all at once" and at the same time to safeguard its immediate security, independence, and global identity.

Brazil's Position on the War in Ukraine: The Search for a Difficult Balance

Paulo Velasco Junior

Brazil's non-confrontational stance and respect for peace are part and parcel of its international identity. The country always appears ready and committed to contribute to the peaceful resolution of disputes and conflict mediation,[141] in accordance with Article 4 of the Federal Constitution of 1988, which outlines the guiding principles of Brazil's international relations. In addition to having actively participated in the mediation of several international crises and conflicts, the country also assumes responsibilities in multilateral spaces, such as the UN, where it frequently acts as a rotating member of the UNSC. Within the UNSC, it prioritises preventive diplomacy and diplomatic means of conflict resolution, as provided for in Chapter 6 of the UN Charter, as well as non-violent means to protect civilians.

Brazil and the Invasion of Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine, Brazil, occupying a seat in the UNSC as a rotating member for the 2022–3 biennium, voted in favour of the resolution proposed on 25 February 2022 that condemned the invasion. In the words of Brazilian Ambassador to the UN, Ronaldo Costa Filho, "We renew our appeal for the full cessation of hostilities, for the withdrawal of troops, and for the immediate resumption of diplomatic dialogue. There is no alternative to negotiation to solve the present crisis."[142] Brazil clearly acted in line with its best diplomatic traditions in the defence of sovereignty, the non-use of force, and a negotiated solution to the crisis.

Similarly, Brazil supported the resolution proposed at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Eleventh Emergency Special Session on 2 March 2022, condemning the Russian invasion as a violation of international law. Brazil made a point, however, of voicing certain reservations, namely, by criticising the text's lack of balance and excessive politicisation. Indeed, Brazil's ambassador the UN Ronaldo Costa Filho emphasised that "the resolution cannot be seen as something that allows the indiscriminate application of sanctions."[143]

Having supported the aforementioned UNGA and UNSC resolutions, Brazil chose to abstain from other important votes, making it clear, though, that it disagreed with the way in which certain countries sought to respond to the invasion of Ukraine. Brazil criticised the excessive politicisation of the debates and the attempt to isolate Russia without any substantial effort to negotiate a solution. Moreover, in line with the other BRICS countries,

[141] Federico Merke, *Identity and Foreign Policy in Argentina and Brazil*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 2008, p. 76.

[142] Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement and Explanation of Vote by the Permanent Representative Ambassador Ronaldo Costa Filho in the Security Council Debate on the Question of Ukraine," 22 February 2022, https://https://www.gov.br/mre/en/contact-us/press-area/press-releases/statement-and-explanation-of-vote-by-the-permanent-representative-ambassador-ronaldo-costa-filho-in-the-security-council-debate-on-the-question-of-ukraine.

[143] Quoted in "Brazil Votes for UN Resolution, But Criticizes 'Indiscriminate Sanctions' against Russia," *Reuters*, 2 March 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/brazil-votes-un-resolution-criticizes-indiscriminate-sanctions-against-russia-2022-03-02/.

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Brazil also abstained from voting on the UN Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization resolution on 16 March 2022, from voting on the International Labour Organization resolution on 23 March 2022, and from the vote to suspend Russia from the UN HRC.

Brazilian diplomatic tradition eschews taking extreme positions that could compromise efforts to reach an understanding. As regards sanctions, the country believes that these are rarely the best path because they tend to isolate the state engaging in deviant behaviour, thus undermining that state's trust in the international community which is essential to reaching peaceful agreements.[144] Furthermore, economic sanctions have major negative effects on the populations of the targeted states, which have no control over the abusive practices of their leaders who are themselves minimally affected.

Brazil's International Identity and Its Conceptual Foundations

In addition to its quest for a more prominent international leadership role and the status of a "global player," Brazil has reinforced its decision to base its international involvement on the ideas of autonomy and universalism. In the 1960s, there was a noticeable shift away from the country's traditional alignment with Washington in favour of a more autonomous engagement, one committed to a more just and less asymmetrical world order. Since then, autonomy has remained a pillar of Brazil's international engagements, other than during the short period of the Collor administration (1990–2) and, more recently, in 2019–20, when there was a clear convergence of interests between Brazilian President Bolsonaro and US President Trump.

Autonomy has also served as a stimulus for a universalist practice, understood as the effort to diversify partnerships, even with countries that are in no way aligned with Brazil's values, principles, or even political practices on many issues. This explains why Brazil maintains cordial relations with countries under authoritarian regimes, even those that are known violators of human rights, despite of its active defence of democracy, rule of law, and individual rights and freedoms. According to ambassador Celso Amorim, special adviser to Brazilian president Lula da Silva and Brazil's former foreign minister, "By universalist foreign policy we mean that Brazil has no prejudices or preconceived views. We are interested in dialogue with all regions of the globe."[145]

As a complement to this rationale, Brazilian leaders understand that, to preserve the opportunities offered by universalism, and given its pragmatic foreign policy approach, Brazil should not take sides with countries engaged in conflict or hostilities. This explains, for example, the country's efforts to maintain good relations with both Israel and Palestine and also why Brazil has offered to act as a peace mediator.[146]

Furthermore, the commitment to non-interference in internal affairs, enshrined in international law as a corollary of the principle of sovereignty and actively defended by Brazil, also helps to explain why the country avoids making strong public condemnations of states that are experiencing domestic instability or where persecution and violence against minority groups are rampant. This goes not just for countries in the surrounding region but also

[144] In the 2000s, it was common for Brazilian diplomacy to abstain from supporting resolutions of the UN Commission on Human Rights (the current Human Rights Council) condemning countries, as it believed that the public condemnation of the state in question would do nothing to stop human rights violations and could, in fact, contribute to their aggravation.

[145] Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Speech by Minister Celso Amorim on the Occasion of the Opening of the International Relations Course at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro," 13 April 2009. https://www.gov.br/mre/pt-br/centrais-de-conteudo/publicacoes/discursos-artigos-e-entrevistas/ministro-das-relacoes-exteriores/discursos-mre/celso-amorim/aula-inaugural-proferida-pelo-ministro-das-relacoes-exteriores-embaixador-celso-amorim-por-ocasiao-da-abertura-do-curso-de-relacoes-internacionais-da-universidade-federal-do-rio-de-janeiro-rio-de-janeiro-13-04-2009.

[146] It is important to consider that Brazil's commitment not to get involved in armed conflicts also characterises the country's actions in its own region. This was the case with Brazilian neutrality during the Falklands war in 1982 between Argentina and the UK and also in the Cenepa war in 1995 between Peru and Ecuador, where the country acted as a mediator together with Chile, Argentina, and the USA.

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for African countries and important partners from the Middle East and the BRICS. Therefore, disregarding domestic abuses and violations led by the Russian government is a matter of diplomatic pragmatism, something that also contributes to a softer position in the case of the invasion of Ukraine.

In Brazil's case, the pursuit of an international leadership role and achievement of the status of global power—thus going beyond the traditional classification of Brazil as a middle power, intermediate country, or emerging power—are indicative of a realist approach to foreign policy that pays close attention to the distribution of material capacities in the international system.[147] This role transition represents a complex and challenging historical process of change in international hierarchy, scale, and status—in three main dimensions: (1) Within global governance institutions, with the transition from being a rule-taker to a rule-maker; (2) in the international political economy, by increasing the country's relative weight in international trade and in regional and global Gross Domestic Product; and (3) in socialisation between states, by being recognised as a global power by dominant actors on the international scene.[148]

Actually, the history of Brazilian foreign policy reveals a constant tension between the pursuit of power and the search for development. When one adds to this tension the pacifist, reconciliatory, and territorially satisfied image that Brazil has of itself, the result is the quest for a more prominent international leadership role, although not through classic displays of military might or dissemination of a given ideology of the state in the rest of the region, but rather through diplomacy and political dialogue.[149]

Conceptual Foundations of Brazil's Position on the Ukraine War

The attempt to maintain a balanced and equidistant relationship with Russia and Ukraine in the context of the current war has set the tone for Brazil's preferred position,[150] which is one of the rare points of continuity in the foreign policies of the Bolsonaro and Lula administrations. Moreover, one cannot rightly speak of neutrality, as Brazil has repeatedly condemned the invasion for violating the basic principles of international law.

In September 2023, President Lula and his Ukrainian counterpart finally had a conversation in New York, having failed to meet at the G7 summit in the Japanese city of Hiroshima earlier that year. According to Lula, they "had a good conversation about the importance of paths to building peace." Brazilian foreign minister Mauro Vieira said that the meeting between Lula and Zelenskiy was conducted in a "cooperative mood" and that both countries would keep talking to strengthen bilateral ties. Vieira stressed, as well, that Lula showed a willingness to talk to "both sides" involved in the conflict and reaffirmed that Brazil condemns, in line with certain previous Brazilian votes in the UN, the territorial invasion of countries.

During Lula's speech at the opening of the 78th UNGA in September 2023, the Brazilian president, without mentioning Russia, stressed that the UNSC's loss of creditability is the "result of actions from its permanent members, who wage unauthorised wars aimed at territorial expansion or regime change." Furthermore, he affirmed that "the war in the Ukraine exposes our collective inability to enforce the purposes and principles of the UN Charter," adding that "no solution will be lasting if it is not based on dialogue" and "that

[147] Maria Regina Soares de Lima, "Analytical Approaches to Foreign Policy: The Brazilian Case", in Roberto Russell, ed., *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches for the Study of Foreign Policy* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano/RIAL, 1992), pp. 58–62; Merke, *Identity and Foreign Policy in Argentina and Brazil*, pp. 96–100.

[148] Carlos R. S. Milani, Letícia Pinheiro, and Maria Regina Soares De Lima, "Brazil's Foreign Policy and the 'Graduation Dilemma'," *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (2017), pp. 585–605.

[149] Merke, *Identity and Foreign Policy in Argentina and Brazil*, p. 95.

[150] As has already been said, for Brazil, this means not taking sides with any of the parties in conflict.

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work needs to be done to create space for negotiations."[151] All those points highlighted by the Brazilian president reinforce the position of Brazil since the beginning of the war, that is to say, the country has no problem in officially condemning the invasion, albeit carefully choosing its words so as to maintain a certain balance between the two sides at war, as well as between Global South countries and Western states. If there is to be global harmony, the international community must develop mechanisms to bridge the divide between the North and the South and Western and non-Western states—a function wherein Brazilian diplomacy claims to be useful due to its universalist international identity.

In May 2024, Brazil and China signed a joint statement calling for peace talks, "held at a proper time that is recognised by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties."[152] The document, signed by Celso Amorim, a special adviser to Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, confirmed that the two countries believe that negotiation is the only viable solution to the "Ukraine crisis."

The concepts of autonomy, universalism, the defence of peace, and peaceful settlement of disputes, all of which are fundamental components of the country's international identity, contain elements sufficient to explain Brazil's resistance to giving in to pressure from the USA or European countries either to send weapons to Ukraine or support the US-led Western sanctions against Russia. Brazil believes that isolating Russia and portraying it as the villain of the piece significantly reduces the chances of peace talks. Brazilian foreign policy has consequently not adopted the liberal interpretation attributing the invasion to the despotic and autocratic impulses of President Vladmir Putin.

Brazil is unlikely to imperil its relations with Russia, the country with whom it established a strategic partnership in 2002 and on which it depends for fertiliser imports that are fundamental to the Brazilian agribusiness sector. In 2023, in the midst of the invasion of Ukraine, bilateral trade reached an all-time high of US$11.4 billion, up nearly 55% from the 2021 figure. Furthermore, despite Brazil's differences with Russia on issues of democracy and human rights, the two countries share such goals as the defence of a more multipolar order and also coordinate their participation in groups such as the BRICS, which strengthens Brazil's international position and bargaining power.

The dispute between China and the USA at the global level also influences Brazil's position on the Ukraine war. Brazil does not wish to choose between Washington and Beijing, rather seeking to maintain a balanced relationship with both without aligning automatically with one or the other, so to maximise possible gains from both sides. During his visit to China in April 2023, President Lula proposed to Xi Jinping the creation of a group of countries whose specific aim is to broker peace in Ukraine. This position is consistent with Brazil's tradition of pacifism and its advocacy of the peaceful settlement of disputes. In a conversation with Joe Biden at the White House in February 2023, President Lula criticised the invasion of Ukraine as violating the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but studiously avoided making any commitment to send weapons to Ukrainian troops.

Interested in maintaining good relations with the USA and China, Brazil remains firmly committed to preserving room to manoeuvre sufficient to enable adjustment of its actions and strategies and avoids any sign of subservience or subordination to either side. Diverging from the USA in some UN votes, however, does not signify Brazil's full convergence with Beijing's positions on the war. For example, Brazil voted in favour of the 23 February 2023, UNGA resolution, on the eve of the war's first anniversary, which called for an end to the conflict and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. China, India, and South Africa, Brazil's partners in the BRICS, on the other hand, chose to abstain.

[151] The Planalto Palace, "Speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva at the Opening of the 78th UN General Assembly," 19 September 2023, https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/follow-the-government/speeches/speech-by-president-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-at-the-opening-of-the-78th-un-general-assembly.

[152] Quoted in "Brazil, China Call for Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks with Both Countries," *Reuters*, 23 May 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/brazil-china-call-russia-ukraine-peace-talks-with-both-countries-2024-05-23/.

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Another example of Brazil's determination to follow its own path, which is not necessarily aligned with that of other countries of the Global South, was its vote on 12 October 2022, in favour of the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's annexation of the provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. In Brazil's view, given the difficulties that the populations of these invaded and occupied territories faced in freely expressing their will, the referenda held in these provinces prior to the annexation lacked legitimacy. China, for its part, was one of 35 countries that abstained from this vote.

Role theory is also useful in explaining Brazil's positions on the Ukraine conflict. Importing concepts from the fields of sociology and social psychology, Holsti argued that national role conceptions represent important causal variables in international politics. A role is a pattern of behaviour that a state actor deems appropriate in a given context, based on the actor's self-image and the expectations others have of that actor.[153]

The set of norms, demands, and rules that others (alter) attribute to a given role establishes role prescriptions, to which the individual (self) adapts when assuming that role. Actors develop role conceptions, which serve to mediate between the alter's social expectations and the objectives, values, perceptions, and attitudes that the actors themselves bring to the role they have chosen. Role conceptions, therefore, are manifestations of the ego and simultaneously incorporate elements of the self and the alter.

Holsti's innovation consisted in transposing the idea of role conceptions to the level of interstate relations. While acknowledging that the international system does not have the same degree of cohesion, organisation, and hierarchy as do domestic societies, Holsti observes that international relations studies often use the concept of status to describe the stratification of positions among states, based on their involvement in foreign affairs, their respective military capacity, economic weight, and prestige, among others. Holsti proposes that states have national role conceptions, which "include the policymakers' own definitions of the general kind of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system."[154]

Since the 1980s, Brazil had adopted the roles of "regional leader" and "regional-subsystem collaborator" in Latin America. These roles have been complemented by that of "mediator-integrator," which Brazil has assumed historically in efforts to establish peace among its neighbours, as well as "bridge" on the hemispheric and global levels. The latter requires Brazil to place itself in the polarisation between the North and the South or even within the Global South. It also implies a communication function, i.e. translating and conveying information among different groups of countries. In the case of Brazil, this would indicate that it has good relations with countries of both the Global North and the Global South.

This is one of the reasons why Brazil identifies itself as both a Western country with a broad range of partnerships and fruitful relations with actors of the Global North and a leader of the Global South's search for a more balanced and less asymmetrical international order—one that is more representative of the interests of developing countries, when Brazil assumes "a soft revisionist stance."

Finally, at both the global level and in its bilateral relations with the hegemonic power, the USA, Brazil has sought to play an "active independent" role. According to Holsti, this role involves diplomatic activities that go beyond military and ideological commitments by including the search for new trade partners, while reaffirming elements of independence, self-determination, and national interest. This is a role that Brazil has traditionally assumed. It is the one that is compatible with the concepts of autonomy and universalism that are

[153] Kalevi Jaakko Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1970), p. 239.
[154] Ibid., pp. 245–6.

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characteristic of the country's international identity, which Brazil defends, once again, in relation to the invasion of Ukraine.

In sum, whether looking at the conceptual pillars of Brazil's international identity or the roles that the country has played, we find that its positions on the Ukraine war are coherent and logical, as are its votes in international organisations. The major challenge for Brazil will be to continue maintaining the balance not only between Russia and Ukraine but also between long-standing Western allies and strategic partners of the Global South amid a world marked by growing numbers of conflicts and divisions.

South Africa's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Shortcomings of a Decolonial Analysis

Candice Moore

Introduction

South Africa's unwavering yet understated support of Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has surprised the foreign relations fraternity in capitals of the Global North. This support has taken the form of South Africa's abstentions from resolutions against Russia in the UNGA, naval exercises conducted with Russia (and China) in March 2023, and repeated statements by high office holders in support of Russia.[155] These are all valid indicators of support for a country—Russia—that is being increasingly marginalised in international politics, if the number of UNGA votes against its behaviour is a measure. This essay sheds some light on South Africa's position in relation to the invasion by positing a decolonial approach to understanding it, at the same time arguing that such an approach cannot fully explain South Africa's response. The paper is divided into three substantive parts: the first documents the key aspects of South Africa's diplomatic response to the invasion, the second proposes a theory for making sense of this response, and the third provides an analysis in light of the theory.

South Africa's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The day after the invasion, a tersely worded statement on the conflict by the South African government's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), reflecting the government's "dismay" and calling on "Russia to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine in line with the United Nations Charter" surprised many.[156] The statement referred to "escalating conflict" between Russia and Ukraine, alluding to the conflict's long germination and implied equivalence between Russia and Ukraine.

DIRCO's February 24 statement was swiftly invalidated by another from South Africa's governing political party, the African National Congress (ANC), released on 27 February. The Party's own statement, reflecting more favourably on Russia, not only referenced "eight years [of] persistent shelling of Donetsk and Lugansk [by Ukraine]" but also called for dialogue as a means of resolving disputes and a central role for the UN, albeit at the same time accusing the Organisation of "dismal failure." The Party statement referenced the Cold War and criticised the trampling of multilateralism. The ANC's understanding of the Minsk

[155] Allegations of arms sales to Russia by South Africa made at the highest level were refuted and said to be baseless. Gabriele Steinhauser, "US Says South Africa Supplied Weapons, Ammunition to Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 May 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-says-south-africa-supplied-weapons-ammunition-to-russia-c2489d54. The South African government stated that an independent enquiry into the allegations found no evidence to support it (BBC News, 4 September 2023).

[156] Department of International Relations and Cooperation of Republic of South Africa, "South African Government Calls For a Peaceful Resolution of the Escalating Conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine," 24 February 2022, https://dirco.gov.za/south-african-government-calls-for-a-peaceful-resolution-of-the-escalating-conflict-between-the-russian-federation-and-ukraine/.

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agreements, favouring the Russian interpretation, however, is not the one to which all parties to the conflict subscribe.[157] The ANC also referred to other countries which "wantonly attack, invade and occupy," seemingly alluding to the US invasion of Iraq, while simultaneously calling for "repercussions" for "harm on civilians," without specification of the type of repercussions.[158]

South African diplomacy has followed a pattern of favouring Russian interests and interpretations by abstaining from voting on several UNGA resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and also on resolutions otherwise related to the conflict. South Africa abstained from voting on the 2 March 2022 resolution ("Aggression against Ukraine") that called on Russia to halt its aggression and withdraw its troops and on the 24 March 2022 draft resolution ("Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine") that recognised the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as a direct result of the Russian invasion.[159] On the latter, the South African delegation tabled a competing text, decrying the humanitarian crisis but omitting mention of the Russian Federation and which the UNGA declined to put to a vote. South Africa similarly abstained from the vote on 7 April 2022, calling for Russia's suspension from the UN HRC due to its gross and systematic abuse of human rights. South Africa's main critique of the resolution, adopted in November 2022, calling on Russia to pay Ukraine reparations for war-related damages, was that it would enable the creation of a separate body not accountable to the Assembly.[160] South Africa, moreover, called on the UNGA to "refrain from double standards," noting that there was no clarity in the resolution on the structure of the proposed reparations committee, or its legal standing.[161] The country abstained from a fifth resolution adopted on 23 February 2023, almost a year to the day after the war began, calling for an end to the conflict. In abstaining from these votes, which passed with the support of a majority of UNGA member states, South Africa joined a selection of countries in the Global South that chose to abstain.

South Africa's Response in the Context of Its Foreign Policy

The response of the ANC and, by implication, of the South African government must be seen in the light of several factors.

First, South African foreign policy does not exist independently of the governing party, the ANC, which holds a National Conference every 5 years. The Party's highest decision-making body, this Conference is where the new Party leadership is elected to lead the organisation for the next 5 years and delegates vote upon and confirm important policy documents (as Resolutions). These policy documents, drafted by the Party elite, guide government policy. Thus, Naledi Pandor's decisions as Minister count for little in the larger

[157] Russia and Ukraine view the Minsk Agreements differently. While Kyiv, by the time of the invasion in February 2022, saw the agreements as a path to re-establishing control over the rebel territories of Donetsk and Lugansk, Moscow saw Minsk II as a way to provide comprehensive autonomy and representation in the central government to the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. See Kristian Atland, "Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2020), pp. 122–39.

[158] International Relations Sub-Committee of African National Congress, "ANC Concerned by the Rapid Escalation of Conflict between Russia and Ukraine," 27 February 2022, https://www.anc1912.org.za/anc-concerned-by-the-rapid-escalation-of-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine-27-february-2022/.

[159] United Nations, "Aggression against Ukraine," *UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1*, 2 March 2022, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_es-11_1.pdf; United Nations, "Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression against Ukraine," *UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/2*, 24 March 2022, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_es-11_2.pdf.

[160] United Nations, "Suspension of the Rights of Membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council," *UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/3*, 7 April 2022, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_es-11_3.pdf.

[161] Peter Fabricius, "SA Abstains from UN General Assembly Resolution Demanding Russia Pay Reparations to Ukraine for War Damage," *Daily Maverick*, 15 November 2022, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-15-sa-abstains-from-un-general-assembly-resolution-demanding-russia-pay-reparations-to-ukraine-for-war-damage/.

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scheme of Party politics and international affairs, and hence the ease with which the statement from her Department could be dispensed by the Party.

Second, the Party/Government has a fairly consistent track record of "quiet diplomacy" or of being seen not overtly to take sides on most major international conflicts. Two striking exceptions, however, include South Africa's stances on Palestine and Western Sahara. These are two conflicts on which the Government and Party have been outspoken (see the ANC website[162] on Palestine Solidarity—predating the current war on Palestinians—and on Western Sahara[163]), going so far as to organise solidarity campaigns, in the case of Palestine, and "mobilise the international community in pursuit of Sahrawi independence," in the case of Western Sahara.

Third, the Party sees the Russian invasion through the lens of *its own specific* history as a liberation movement, and not necessarily as a benevolent agent, in world affairs. In the current Party elite's (now widely discredited) understanding of the ANC's own international history, the contribution of the Russian Socialist Federative Republic is remembered for the assistance provided to the ANC during the struggle. The section of history regarding the training of cadres in Odesa, Kyiv, and Lviv, among others, meanwhile, is not as prominent.[164] The ANC hence sees Russia as the successor state of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Furthermore, the myth of 30 years' unbroken friendship with Russia is misleading as, notwithstanding the Soviet Union's vital role in the ANC's continued existence in exile,[165] Nelson Mandela's first state visit to Russia did not take place until April 1999, and relations only truly recommenced in earnest in the second decade of the 2000s, spurred by positive personal interactions between former President Jacob Zuma and President Vladimir Putin.

A fourth consideration is South Africa's relationship with Russia in the context of BRICS. South African foreign policy is significantly influenced by "a desire to see the [global] balance of forces change to reflect the rise of emerging powers."[166] The BRICS relationship, moreover, altered how each side viewed their bilateral ties: "Although relations between the new South Africa and the Russian Federation were neither side's priority after 1994, this changed after South Africa joined the BRICS."[167]

Another consideration is Russia's recent geopolitical assertiveness in Africa. At least one observer has analysed the strategies that Russia is using. They include "debt-for development" swaps, nuclear technology exports, military and paramilitary cooperation, disinformation campaigns, and sponsorship for political parties.[168] South Africa has been relatively mute in regard to Russia's approach to the Continent, which has witnessed the latter's stepped up influence in coup-hit West Africa and support for authoritarian governments, as well as other military, economic and diplomatic interests.[169] On paper, these activities are clearly at odds with South Africa's Africa vision, directed by the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, yet South African officials have studiously avoided these topics in public forums.

[162] African National Congress, "ANC Solidarity with the People of Palestine: Campaign," https://www.anc1912.org.za/home-2021-anc-solidarity-with-the-people-of-palestine/.

[163] Parliamentary Monitoring Group, "Western Sahara and South Africa Relations: Public Lecture, with Deputy Minister," PMG, 15 March 2017, https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/24170/.

[164] Hilary Lynd, "The Politics of Imperial Gratitude," *Africa Is a Country*, 14 March 2022, https://africasacountry.com/2022/03/the-politics-of-imperial-gratitude.

[165] Stephen Ellis, "The ANC in Exile," *African Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 360 (1991), pp. 439–47.

[166] Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "South Africa's Response to the Ukrainian Crisis," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, June 2014, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/181295/1d676013a28a2c93f0abf4a5dfc4567b.pdf.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Dzvinka Kachur, "Manifestations of Russian Formal and Informal Strategies in Southern and Eastern Africa, 2000-2022," *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 29 No. 4 (2022), pp. 509–34.

[169] Mariel Ferragamo, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa," Council on Foreign Relations, 28 December 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa.

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Less clear are the party-to-party links that the ANC shares with Putin's United Russia party. The Democratic Alliance, South Africa's main opposition party, highlighted the ANC's straitened financial circumstances and reports of donations to the governing party from Russian oligarchs rumoured to be close to Putin. Indeed, the ANC itself declared a donation of Rand [R]15-million from a company linked to an oligarch facing sanctions from Western countries.[170] In Parliament, meanwhile, then-Deputy President David Mabuza stated that there was "nothing sinister, nothing hidden" about his visits to Russia in 2021, where, according to news reports, he spent more than a month receiving medical treatment for an undisclosed illness.[171] The ANC did, however, send its Secretary-General to the February 2024 meeting of the Forum of Supporters for the Fight against Modern Neo-Colonialist Practices, held in Moscow, under the auspices of Russia. Russia's "world majority" terminology, however, does not appear to have entered the ANC lexicon, which may or may not be an indication of the Party's convictions regarding Russia's professed anti-neocolonialist stance.

The ANC has maintained consistency in its position on the conflict in Ukraine. When, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, the government refused to condemn the annexation. The ANC, in referencing in the 27 February 2022 statement the "eight years [of] persistent shelling of Donetsk and Lugansk" appears to accept the Russian government's version of events in eastern Ukraine. It appears to bristle at the Ukrainian government's attacks on the seemingly innocent self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, but makes no mention of Russian involvement in the region. The ANC, and therefore the Government, sees the aggression as a natural outcome of NATO's growing encroachment that poses an existential threat to Russia.

The context of South Africa's tacit support for Russia is thus complex. The ANC's worldview as a former liberation movement provides the framing for much of its foreign policy decision-making. Understood from a Western perspective, South Africa's response to the conflict is difficult to justify and, indeed, mystifying. However, I argue that its response should be seen from a decolonial or "Southern" perspective, which I outline here and go on to analyse South Africa's response through this lens.[172] However, even within this more charitable frame, South Africa's position, as I argue below, remains difficult to justify.

Decolonial Standpoint Theory and Internationalism of the Global South

Decolonial standpoint theory is a new perspective advanced here with which to analyse the foreign policy decisions of countries of the Global South which, having often experienced colonisation and subsequent liberation, have a unique outlook on the world infused with thinking shaped by these experiences. Decolonial standpoint theory takes inspiration from the broader standpoint theory that contends "that a standpoint arises when an individual recognises and challenges cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordination or oppression of particular groups."[173] Decolonial standpoint theory is an epistemology

[170] Cebelihle Bhengu, "ANC Declares R15-Million Donation from Company Linked to Sanctioned Russian Oligarch," *News24*, 1 March 2023, https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/anc-declares-r15-million-donation-from-company-linked-to-sanctioned-russian-oligarch-20230301.

[171] Jan Gerber, "Mabuza Claims 'Nothing Sinister' about His Russian Sojourn," *News24*, 21 March 2022, https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/mabuza-claims-nothing-sinister-about-his-russian-sojourn-20220331.

[172] Candice Moore, *Governing Parties and Southern Internationalism: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Foreign Policies of South Africa and Brazil, 1999–2010*, Ph.D. Dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011; Candice Moore, "Internationalism in the Global South: The Evolution of a Concept," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 53, No.6 (2017), pp. 852–65.

[173] Julia T. Wood, ed., "Feminist Standpoint Theory," *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory Sage Reference Online* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), pp.397–9.

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advancing the view that Global South social science should be practiced from the perspective of people in the Global South seeking to delink postcolonial peoples "from the *arbitrary* linkages made between culture, power and Eurocentric knowledge systems."[174]

Their experience with liberation struggles causes political elites in the Global South to see the world in a different way from those in Europe and the USA. The inception of the relationships these elites hold with the West tends to be antagonistic and rooted in struggle. Memory and certain understandings of history play an enormous role in forging such perspectives. Second, the world is seen in a Manichean way. States were either "with us" during anti-colonial struggles or "against us" even though administrations and leaders have moved on since then. Third, relations are almost always framed within an overarching framework of marginalisation, exploitation, and manipulation of the South by the North.

One of the primary lenses utilised in this approach is that of liberation solidarity. Moore[175] has characterised this approach as bearing the following hallmarks:

(1) Solidarity between states of the developing or former Third World;
(2) Respect for state sovereignty;
(3) Scepticism of certain Western norms, such as humanitarian intervention;
(4) Commitment to multilateralism;
(5) Commitment to non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states, and;
(6) The peaceful resolution of international disputes.

An Analysis of South Africa's Position on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Recommendations for a More Credible Approach

Taken in turn, the hallmarks noted above may be used to examine the Southern internationalist credentials of South Africa's approach. On this metric, only "scepticism of Western norms" and "commitment to multilateralism" stand up to scrutiny. The South African approach fails on all other measures. Given voting patterns in the General Assembly, where most countries have supported the Western position on the Russian invasion, no deliberate framing of solidarity is evident in the Global South. There has, for instance, been no attempt to revive the Non-Aligned Movement as a broker of peace in the conflict. Although Russia is not a member of the Global South, Moscow is not associated with colonial expansion in Africa and Latin America and thus enjoys a measure of political support. South Africa has clearly abnegated its support of respect for state sovereignty, while paying it lip service in justifying its votes. It has also been silent on Russia's central role in the invasion, which constitutes blatant interference in the domestic affairs of another state. In the context of an ongoing war, South Africa has continued to insist on the conflict's "peaceful resolution" through dialogue, thus hindering multilateral efforts to exert political pressure on Russia in the UN.

What is additionally confusing for analysts is the price that South Africa is willing to pay for this "moralising" stance in the UN. According to the South African Revenue Service, in February 2023, the country's top five trade partners in terms of exports were China, the USA, Germany, India, and Japan. In terms of imports, the top five were China, Germany, USA, India, and UAE.[176] Meanwhile, South Africa's exports to both Russia and to Ukraine are negligible when compared with those to its more established trading partners. Now that the war has entered its third year, South Africa has begun to pay the price for its commitment to Russia. For example, the country has benefitted extensively from preferential trade

[174] Quijano, cited in Elena Ruiz, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories," in Kim Q. Hall and Sveinsdóttir Ásta, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 541–51.
[175] Moore, "Internationalism in the Global South," pp.852–65.
[176] South African Revenue Service, "Trade Statistics," 2023, https://www.sars.gov.za/customs-and-excise/trade-statistics/.

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with the USA under the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, and the agreement is due for renewal in 2025. The USA is, however, growing increasingly impatient with South Africa's pro-Russia, anti-Western stance. In February 2023, the US House of Representatives introduced a bill "opposing the Republic of South Africa's hosting of military exercises with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and calling on the Biden administration to conduct a thorough review of the United States-South Africa relationship."[177] Although expert observers are not overly concerned about any direct repercussions the bill may have, they nevertheless sound a note of caution to South Africa.[178] South Africa's position also posed tensions vis-à-vis its responsibilities to the International Criminal Court, in view of the country's initial contortion of its responsibilities to the Court in efforts to avoid Putin's arrest should he step on South African soil.

Despite the 2013 "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" (CSP) that South Africa and Russia signed, the density of official and business relations between the two countries in the first two decades of the 21st century was not high. Lofty plans for deeper engagement prior to and since the formal conclusion of the CSP have not borne fruit.[179] What the CSP does outline, however, is a commitment by each party not to "become involved in any alliance or armed conflict directed against the other party or to join any agreement that will infringe upon the sovereignty, territorial integrity or 'national security interests' of the other side."[180] Civil society linkages between the two countries are weak to non-existent. The main links between the two countries appear to be through their governments and their governing parties.

Conclusion

South Africa's position regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine has surprised leaders and diplomats in Western capitals. A close reading of the country's diplomatic history and foreign policy-making processes reveals, however, that it has always been reticent to condemn countries not belonging to the Western fold and consistently taken an alternative view of international affairs as one encapsulated by "Southern internationalism".[181] Although a moral case can be made to justify the substance of South Africa's position on the conflict, the rationale does not fully support South Africa's chosen stances. Why is the country willing to sacrifice its international reputation and potentially do harm to its future trade and business relations with key trading partners by holding what the latter view as an unpalatable position? If the country was set on forging a new global consensus on consistency in the application of international law, why has it not used its influence within the African Union to build an AU-based African coalition on this issue,[182] rather than risk its own standing with powerful Western nations? An African Peace Initiative comprising seven countries—Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Egypt, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia, and South Africa—formed a delegation to Ukraine and Russia in mid-2023. While the initiative represented the first

[177] John James, "Opposing the Republic of South Africa's Hosting of Military Exercises with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and Calling on the Biden Administration to Conduct a Thorough Review of the United States-South Africa Relationship," United States House of Representatives, 2023, https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/145/titles.

[178] Peter Fabricius, "Dangerous Liaisons: SA's Russian Roulette Jeopardises Trade Agreements with US and Other Western Nations," *Daily Maverick*, 8 April 2023, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-04-08-dangerous-liaisons-sas-russian-roulette-jeopardises-trade-agreements-with-us-and-other-western-nations/.

[179] Alexandra Arkhangelskaya and Vladimir Shubin, "Russia–South Africa Relations: Beyond Revival," South Afircan Institue of International Affairs, October 2013, https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Policy-Briefing-75.pdf.

[180] Deon Geldenhuys, "The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between South Africa and Russia," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, Vol. 37, No.2 (2013), pp.118–45.

[181] Moore, "Governing Parties and Southern Internationalism."

[182] John Stremlau, "African Countries Showed Disunity in UN Votes on Russia: South Africa's Role Was Pivotal," *The Conversation*, 8 April 2022, https://theconversation.com/african-countries-showed-disunity-in-un-votes-on-russia-south-africas-role-was-pivotal-180799.

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African effort to broker a peace deal outside the Continent, and the mission succeeded where others had failed in presenting proposals to both Ukraine and Russia, it was otherwise not successful and has only underlined the lack of a broad-based African initiative to weigh in on the conflict.[183]

It is highly questionable whether South Africa–Russia relations since the end of apartheid, characterised by top-heavy elite interactions, including the BRICS formation but very little else, justify the level of diplomatic loyalty shown by South Africa to Russia to date. What the foregoing analysis shows is that South Africa's traditional foreign policy principles might have been upheld without being seen to succumb to Western norms or pressure, but instead, it has chosen a lone path littered with risks, a finding that leaves us with more questions than answers.

Protective Integration: Making Sense of the Iranian Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Abdolrasool Divsallar

After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's relationships with Tehran underwent an unprecedented upgrade, to the extent where officials announced the finalisation of a "long-term strategic cooperation agreement." Iran's reactions to the war in Ukraine combine its keenness to use Russia's clash with the West as an opportunity to build an alliance and uncertainties about the consequences of Iran's support for Moscow. On the one hand, in view of their anti-American policies, Iranian leaders sympathised with Moscow, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei having said, "the US actually started the Ukraine war….US created the grounds for this war to expand NATO in the East."[184] Tehran also abstained from the UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression, thus showing its political support for Moscow. On the other hand, pressed by the moral implications of supporting an invader, negative public views within Iran towards Russia, and national security concerns, Tehran's support had clear limits. Iran condemned the war as a solution and refused to recognise Russian territorial gains in Ukraine in 2022, while also withholding delivery of missile systems to Moscow.

This paper proposes two factors that have shaped Iran's response to the invasion of Ukraine.[185] First, cooperation provides a layer of protection against hybrid threats. Protective integration among authoritarian regimes refers to a collective political solidarity against international processes or agendas that are interpreted as challenging incumbent regimes and their leaders.[186] Four protective strategies are salient in the Russo-Iranian case in contributing to state security and stability. They are political solidarity and strategic sympathy; policy learning through exchange of knowledge, intelligence, and successful policies; provision of military and security assistance; and shielding each other from isolation and international punishment.

Second, Iran sees an opportunity through its greater interdependence with Russia which has emerged due to Russian wartime urgency. For Tehran, this opens the way to a further decoupling from the West and the forming of a club of states outside the US-led order. Rising

[183] Denys Reva and Priyal Singh, "African Peace Mission: One Step Forward, One Step Back?" Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 23 June 2023, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/african-peace-mission-one-step-forward-one-step-back.

[184] Ali Khamenei, "bayanat rahbar enghelab dar ejtema zaeran va mojaveran haram motahare razavi" ("Speech of the Leader among Pilgrimages to Razavi Holey Shrine"), 21 March 2023, https://idc0-cdn0.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/52275/14020101.pdf.

[185] For a more comprehensive discussion, see Abdolrasool Divsallar, "An Authoritarian Alliance: Systemic Factors that Bring Russia and Iran Together," in Abdolrasool Divsallar, ed., *Struggle for Alliance: Russia and Iran after the War in Ukraine* (London, I. B. Tauris and Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 179–206.

[186] Roy Allison, "Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2008), p.186.

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interdependence is both a context and a consequence of protective integration. Interdependence predicts that each participant will forge a path to attain valued outcomes that are dependent to some important degree on the choices made by the other.[187] Immediate interests and limited opportunity costs justify and explain interdependence between Moscow and Tehran.

Protective Integration

The strategic logic behind protective integration is that whereby even if a closer international partnership fails to contribute significantly to economic cooperation or to resolve pressing developmental needs, it can nevertheless be instrumental for domestic stability and in insulating the state from hybrid threats. Moscow and Tehran share a hybrid threat comprising an external security threat and internal instability. Iran is confronting the threat of direct military confrontation with Israel and the USA while under Western sanctions over its nuclear activities. The country is also dealing with the destabilising effects of a growing state–society gap and severe economic and governance challenges.[188] Parallel hybrid threats exist for the Kremlin too. Moscow faces an unprecedented level of external pressure and risks of domestic instability. The social pain of the military campaign in Ukraine, illustrated by national mobilisation, economic costs, and political repression, have generated domestic dissatisfaction in Russia. Moscow elites see these trends and the possibility of defeat in the war as a threat that could culminate in socio-political destabilisation.[189] Facing such a plethora of peril, Moscow and Tehran's security elites are agreed on a vast domain of shared threat that can render states insecure and vulnerable.[190] The leaderships, therefore, prioritise regime security and stability over developmental, economic, or trade goals, concluding that cooperation with like-minded states can serve such an outcome. Moscow and Tehran have adopted at least four strategies to implement their protective integration.

First, Russia's war against Ukraine has generated mutual political solidarity and strategic sympathy. The Islamic Republic's leadership views Moscow as a fellow victim of Western expansionist policies and share Putin's so-called "anti-hegemonic rationale against the US." Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, told Vladimir Putin, in a show of sympathy during his trip to Tehran in July 2022, that NATO would have started the war if the Russian president had "not taken the initiative."[191] Later, Ali Akbar Velayati, chief foreign policy adviser to Iran's supreme leader, expanded Khamenei's view, saying, "NATO broke its post-Cold War commitment to Russia to keep former Soviet Republics as a buffer zone and avoid NATO expansion to these areas. Russia has announced its red lines several times."[192] In Moscow, meanwhile, the Kremlin now better understands the two decades-long challenges of the Islamic Republic's direct confrontation with the West. Russia's March 2023 Concept of Foreign Policy offers a blueprint for resisting international pressure and countering hegemony in international relations, which sets the baselines of Russian strategic sympathy towards Iran.

The dominance of military-security elites in the foreign policy decision-making of both capitals, and their institutionalised contacts, stemming from collaboration in Syria since

[187] Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

[188] Social discontent with the Islamic Republic hit a record high by virtue of the outbreak of nationwide protests in 2022 which were brutally suppressed by the state, sparked by the killing of Mahsa Amini in police custody.

[189] Tatiana Stanovaya, "Divided in the Face of Defeat: The Schism Forming in the Russian Elite," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 December 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/12/divided-in-the-face-of-defeat-the-schism-forming-in-the-russian-elite?lang=en.

[190] Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Shifting Threats and Strategic Adjustment in Iran's Foreign Policy: The Case of Strait of Hormuz," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (2022), pp. 873–95.

[191] Maziar Motamedi, "Iran's Khamenei Says US Wants to Keep Ukraine War Going," *Al Jazeera*, 21 March, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/21/irans-khamenei-says-us-wants-to-keep-ukraine-war.

[192] Ibid.

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2015, has helped to create this solidarity. United Western support for Ukraine has merely reinforced it. Sympathy and the mirroring of each other's political positions are also reflected in the two countries' media and public policy. In contrast to its criticism of the US's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Iranian media avoids any critical discussion about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while Russian media have boosted the former's propaganda in praising the Islamic Republic's resistance to unjust Western pressures. In October 2022, the Russian News Agency and Radio Sputnik signed an agreement with Iran's State Television and Radio to show "unity of goals and objectives to respond to common challenges that Russian and Iranian media face in the era of information wars."[193]

Second, both capitals have deepened their knowledge exchanges, policy learning procedures, and intelligence sharing in the field of regime survivability. Such learning facilitates a sharing of tactics and strategies used to guarantee regime survival.[194] One example is when Moscow transmitted its advice to Iranian authorities in September 2022 on the "best practices" in punitive measures and trained paramilitary Basij forces for suppressing domestic protests.[195] On 25 April 2022, the Iranian government approved an agreement paving the way towards establishing a joint coordination mechanism for information exchange and monitoring cyber security threats, joint training, and mutual provision of technical assistance.[196] On the non-security fronts, Russia has sought to learn from Iran's successful experience and knowledge of circumventing sanctions. In the words of a Kommersant commentator, "Iran can teach Russia the art of parallel import and gray zone operations."[197] These efforts resulted in a security agreement between the two countries' National Security Councils in April 2024.

Third, the war has shifted old patterns of security assistance[198] and generated a new era characterised by mutual provision of security assistance. Unable to countenance, nor afford, Putin's defeat in Ukraine, Tehran[199] hence decided to deliver drones to Russia in its hour of need for Iranian-made weapons. In return, Tehran seeks Russian transfers of high-tech military hardware, such as the SU-35, and, most importantly, of know-how and technology in critical areas such as satellites, air defence, supersonic missiles, and Information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. Russia's collision with the West presents Tehran with the opportunity to push for new models of military cooperation that include joint production and greater exchange of lessons learned. Iran has a production capability and alternative operational concepts, as illustrated in the case of its Shahed drones. Russia might need these over time and can reciprocate by providing technology. Joint production on this basis is gaining traction in areas such as drone and anti-ship missiles.

Fourth, Russia and Iran have attempted to shield each other from international isolation and punishment. Showcased by Putin's travel to Tehran in July 2022 in the context of the Astana peace process, Moscow sees its ties with Tehran as a step towards breaking out of isolation, showing that it has remained a valuable partner for regional powers in the Global South. In addition, both sides see mutual support in multilateral forums as an important way

[193] Sputnik, "Sputnik Expands Cooperation with Iranian Media," 31 October 2022, https://ria.ru/20221031/sputnik-1828051200.html.

[194] See André Bank and Mirjam Edel, "Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings," *GIGA Working Papers*, No. 274 (2015).

[195] Author interview with an anonymous Russian expert, 6 April 2022.

[196] "layehe movafeghatname hamkari iran va russiye dar hozeh amniyat ettelaat tasvib shod" ("An Agreement on Information Security between Iran and Russian passed"), *IRNA News Agency*, 25 April 2022, https://www.irna.ir/news/85317194/لایحه-موافقتنامه-همکاری-ایران-و-روسیه-در-حوزه-امنیت-اطلاعات-تصویب .

[197] "Москва и Тегеран углубляют связи" ("Moscow and Tehran Deepen Ties"), *Kommersant*, 2 October 2022, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5646418.

[198] Abdolrasool Divsallar and Hamidreza Azizi, "Towards a Non-Western Model of Security Assistance: How Iran Assists Militaries," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183661.

[199] Mark N. Katz, "The Ukraine War and Russian Policy in the MENA and Mediterranean Region: Implications for Iran," in Divsallar, ed., *Struggle for Alliance*, pp. 127–48.

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to resist the West and thus have notably increased their coordination in such fora. For Iran in particular, Russia's veto power in UNSC's a critical tool in neutralising Western threats. In one case, regarding efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Russian position tilted towards Tehran's stand after the outbreak of war, and Moscow began portraying the USA as the sole cause of the nuclear crisis. Mikhail Ulyanov, Russian Ambassador to International Organisations in Vienna, reflected Tehran's view when he said, "United States' maximum pressure policy against Iran has no credible peaceful purpose. It was the main reason which compelled Iran to start 60 percent enrichment of uranium."[200]

Greater Degrees of Interdependence

The protective logic has generated political willingness for the division of labour and resources that contributes to a greater degree of interdependence between Moscow and Tehran. The war in Ukraine has fostered more favourable conditions for such an interdependence, for several reasons. First, the global condemnation of the Russian war in Ukraine has reduced Putin's options for partnership with the West for the foreseeable future. The Kremlin's readiness to strategically boost ties with Tehran emerged only after Moscow found itself in a state of international isolation similar to that of Iran and discovered new benefits in working with Tehran. Second, limited cooperation appeared costly for both sides. Urgency imposed the immediate and visible costs of non-cooperation, thus creating incentives for long-term partnerships. Third, and most importantly, the war in Ukraine changed the power dynamic between the two states. Russia struggles to hold a dominant position in its relationship with Iran due to the war's exhaustion of its resources and resultant loss of crucial foreign policy influence on the global stage—a situation that has improved Iran's bargaining position and contributed to a more equitable mutual dependency. Recognition of the mutual benefits and shared opportunity costs that disrupting the relationship would incur are rising factors in the strategic calculations of Tehran and Moscow.

Interdependence through reciprocal actions is that most clearly seen in security affairs. Shortly after the war began, the Kremlin demanded guarantees that Russian benefits from the revival of the JCPOA would be protected from US sanctions, highlighting Moscow's interests even when the USA and Iran are the principal players. Later, and as Iran's confrontation with the Western signatory of the JCPOA escalated in June 2024, Russia issued a joint statement with China and Iran to back Tehran's position. The incident demonstrates the extent to which Tehran's nuclear negotiation strategy becomes ever more dependent on Russian support. In the military domain, Iran's assistance has become an important factor in sustaining certain aspects of Russian offensive military strategy—especially its long-range strike capability—having enabled Russia to hit Ukrainian infrastructure while depleting Ukraine's missile defence stockpiles. On regional issues, the war has deepened the dependency of Russia's Syria policy on Iran. A new division of labour emerged whereby Iranian-backed forces took charge of confronting radical militants and maintaining a pro-Assad position, while Russia's focus was along the Mediterranean, to protect its assets in Syria. This situation allowed Tehran more operational leeway to boost Al-Assad's air defence capabilities for countering Israeli strikes.

The war has also accelerated economic interlinkage. Russia rose to the apex of foreign investors in Iran in 2023 with $2.7 billion—equal to 31% of total foreign investment, while Iran's exports to Russia increased by over 20% in both volume and value. The two countries prioritised initiatives that put into force a regime of trade and economic cooperation that can offset Western sanctions and resolve structural limits to trade. But as Iran's Ambassador to Moscow acknowledges, "there are barriers of cognition, transit, logistics, monetary,

[200] Mikhail Ulyanov, "Tweeter, 16 November 2022," Twitter, https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1592932630148046849.

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banking, and customs problems that limit the expansion of bilateral relations."[201] Since the war's outbreak, businesses and intergovernmental contacts have witnessed an unprecedented surge that will have long-term effects in closing the cognitive gaps between the two sides. Moscow and Tehran set up de-dollarisation as one of the first priorities and have finalised interbank cooperation agreements that enable trade in local currencies rather than the US dollar. Traders can hence now use non-SWIFT interbank systems, while major joint projects are defined to resolve remaining technical difficulties. The two sides also signed a $40 billion Memorandum of Understanding between Gazprom and the National Iranian Oil Company. By the end of 2023, Russian companies had finalised contracts for the exploration of eight oil fields with a total value of $5.4 billion. Joint production of oil and gas instruments and petrochemical product and energy swaps emerged as other areas of cooperation.

Iran's signature of a FTA with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the North-South Transit Corridor (NSTC) are probably the most critical efforts expected to expand economic integration between Russia and Iran. In December 2023, the EAEU and Iran signed a full-scale FTA, encompassing over 8,000 products, which can hugely facilitate trade between Iran and Russia. As evidenced by an earlier Iranian Preferential Trade Agreement with the EAEU, such agreements have had a major impact on mutual trade.[202] The new, far more comprehensive FTA is expected to mitigate to some extent the adverse macroeconomic effects of Western sanctions and boost Russia–Iran trade in the coming years more than any other single initiative. By the end of 2023, Russian transit through Iran increased four-fold to reach 600,000 tonnes, and Moscow plans to increase this volume to 10 million tonnes through the inception of the NSTC. In May 2023, Moscow signed a $1.6 billion contract with Tehran to complete the Astra-Rasht railway project—the most important unfinished segment of the NSTC—which would connect Russia to the Persian Gulf and India. Upon the war's outbreak, transit through the sea-based segment of NSTC, which links Iran and Russia directly through the Caspian Sea and the Eastern segment of NSTC bypassing Turkmenistan, also expanded. Transit through the NSTC doubled in the first quarter of 2023, and Iran is seeking to form a joint international management mechanism for the NSTC with Russia and India.

Conclusion

As long as normalisation with the West remains elusive and the current threat structure endures, Moscow and Tehran's policies will continue to converge. In the eyes of Khamenei and Putin, similar threats make them natural allies that must pool resources to protect themselves. This is the core logic behind the protective integration emerging between the two states. Conflicting interests and serious obstacles originating in social, strategic, institutional, and international issues scale down advancements towards building a more strategic partnership. So far, these limits have not been able to alter a general trend of deepening relations.[203] However, in the longer term, the direction of bilateral ties and sustainability of current thinking are conditioned to changes in at least six variables. (1) Deliverables and actual benefits that closer ties can bring to each side remain the fundamental motivation behind future decisions, given the two states' pragmatic and transactional approach to politics. (2) The US–EU factor plays a major role in the Russia–Iran relationship. Each sides' normalisation with the West can change its strategic calculus. Yet, even in the absence of normalisation, each party tends to avoid maximum confrontation with the

[201] Tehran Times, "Iran, Russia Ink Several Co-op MOUs to Wrap Up 17th Joint Economic Commission," *Tehran Times*, 28 February 2024, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/495520/Iran-Russia-ink-several-co-op-MOUs-to-wrap-up-17th-Joint-Economic.

[202] Amat Adarov and Mahdi Ghodsi, "The Impact of the Eurasian Economic Union–Iran Preferential Trade Agreement on Mutual Trade at Aggregate and Sectoral Levels," *Eurasian Economic Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2021), pp. 125–57.

[203] Divsallar, "An Authoritarian Alliance," p. 196.

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West. Iran's hesitation to deliver missiles to Russia is rooted in such concerns. (3) The fate of the Ukraine war will have a pivotal impact. It determines the balance of power between Moscow and Tehran and the partnership's real value. (4) Persian Gulf security and Gulf Cooperation Council–Russia relations constitute another factor that impacts Moscow's Iran policy. Growing Russian dependency on the Arab states of the Persian Gulf since the start of the Ukraine war will limit Moscow's freedom to upgrade ties with Tehran, especially where military-security cooperation is concerned. One such limit, reflected in various ways, that can upset Tehran in the long run is Russian support for the UAE's claim about Iranian Islands in the Persian Gulf. (5) The ability to build trust and successfully overcome past grievances and suspicions is the next determining factor in Russian–Iran relations. A conservative government of Ebrahim Raeisihas opened up new opportunities to tackle this issue, but this process might be staled as new Iranian president took power. (6) Finally, the future of relations will be dependent on how both sides can regulate relations through a set of principles and shared strategic vision. This is crucial if Moscow and Tehran are to advance beyond current attempts to strengthen ties and build long-term trust through avoiding radical shifts.

For now, one may argue that a gradual process has been triggered which can give the partnership a more strategic character. But it does not mean that the multiple structural obstacles which have impeded full cooperation will be resolved anytime soon. Thus, the emergence of any formal alliance between Russia and Iran remains elusive for the time being.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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