

Perspectives on Russia-Ukraine War: The West vs. The Rest?

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FOREWORD

At the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, many Western politicians and media reports claimed that “The world is united against Russian invasion”. This soon turned out to be a fallacy. During the last nine months, we have seen different narratives from the non-western world, including China and India, the world’s two most populous countries, and many African and Arabian countries. Despite pressure from the West, the non-Western world has largely continued its trade with Russia, declining to join the West’s sanctions against Russia.

In late September 2022, the Oxford Global Society (OXGS) held a [webinar](#) on the topic *Russia-Ukraine War: The West vs. The Rest?* The event brought together leading analysts from both the Western and non-Western worlds to understand better different perspectives on the war in Ukraine and global politics more generally. The event analysed a number of prominent issues arising from the war, including the principle of respect for sovereignty and the threat of nuclear confrontation.

After the event, we invited the speakers to contribute a summary of their views from different perspectives: Robert Wade (the Western), Julie Newton (the Russian), Zhao Hai (the Chinese), Adebayo Olukoshi (the African), and Praveen Donthi (the Indian). In addition, Sir Ivor Roberts, who chaired the webinar, provided his reflections on the discussion. This report is based on the six contributions.

As a non-political think tank, OXGS aims to facilitate dialogue between countries and peoples who hold very different views about the world. In an increasingly politicized and polarized world, we aim to transcend values, ideologies, and national boundaries. Our hope is that this report will help the reader in understanding the different approaches and perspectives towards the conflict.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all speakers for their invaluable contributions to the event and in making this report possible. We extend our special thanks to Sir Ivor Roberts and Prof. Richard Caplan, Professor of International Relations at Oxford University and OXGS Fellow, for contributing to the design and organisation of the event.

Prof. Denis Galligan (OXGS Director, Emeritus Professor at Oxford University)

Dr. Jufang Wang (OXGS Deputy Director)

REFLECTIONS ON THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW ABOUT RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Sir Ivor Roberts

The idea behind the webinar was to examine an alternative narrative to the one popularised in Western media, that the war in Ukraine is unequivocally and unambiguously Putin's fault and that the international community overwhelmingly believed this to be the case. The webinar was held fortuitously the day after a not-so-veiled threat by Putin to use nuclear weapons in the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of Russia ("This is not a bluff") and his order of a partial mobilisation of Russians.

Our panellists gave us an important insight into the alternative view. Several threads emerged.

Firstly, the US and NATO were at least partly to blame for bringing NATO expansion to the borders of Russia, making no allowance for a Russian sense of insecurity, of being under threat from a West determined to see Russia weakened and destabilized.

Secondly, Ukraine cannot be regarded as a 'normal' international entity. It is split between a Catholic West and an Orthodox, Russian speaking East whose Russian culture was close to being crushed after the Maidan revolution, thus leading to Russian action in their defence in 2014 and 2022.

Thirdly, while China and much of the Global South do not believe in military solutions to international conflict, nor do they believe that the current US imposed/led international order is sustainable. The Xi-Putin declaration of boundless friendship at their meeting in Beijing shortly before the invasion of Ukraine should be understood in that context.

Fourthly, for many members of the Global South the Soviet Union was a staunch supporter of their anti-colonialist agenda and as the Soviet Union's principal successor, Russia deserves the benefit of the doubt not opprobrium.

Finally, in many countries of Africa and the Middle East this is seen as a European affair in which they have no real interest. African nations are tired of being lectured by the West about their many internecine conflicts. And even when the African Union (AU) tries to exercise a peacekeeping role it can find its efforts pre-empted by the West (e.g., in Libya).

And of course, the West's double standards are highlighted by the US-led invasions of sovereign countries viz Afghanistan and Iraq. This contributed to the downplaying of the

primacy of territorial integrity and the clear breach of the most basic UN doctrine in terms of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

By the end of the webinar, it was sometimes hard to recall that it was Putin who had pulled the trigger launching a war which has left its economic impacts far beyond the zones of military activity. Nor was there much recognition of the fact that, by invoking the possibility of nuclear weapon use, Putin was raising the stakes in East/West relations in a way not seen for 60 years.

IS NATO ULTIMATELY TO BLAME FOR RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE? NO AND YES

Prof. Robert Wade

The title question invites consideration of the underlying causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I make three main points.

(1) Western media has consistently underplayed one of the basic causes: the long-running "internationalised civil war" within Ukraine, between – to simplify – one set which is Ukrainian speaking and Catholic and concentrated in the west, and another set which is Russian speaking and Russian Orthodox and concentrated in the east. Ukraine has never been a "nation".

For example, on 23 February 2014, the day after Russia-oriented President Yanukovich fled the country, the first act of Ukrainian parliament was to revoke the legal status of Russian as a national language; and more broadly, to prevent regions from allowing the use of any other language than Ukrainian. The government set about blocking access to Russian news, TV channels and radio. All through the next months the government, the broadcast media and large sections of the population chanted the motto "One Nation, One Language, One People".

The fact that language legislation was then not put into law did not suddenly "make everything right again". The efforts to marginalize Russian speakers continued.

The largely Russian speaking and Russian Orthodox believing populations of the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk voted in favour of independence from Ukraine (not integration with Russia). The government in Kyiv launched a war against these provinces to crush their resistance.

(2) US grand strategy has long taken as one of its top goals to prevent the emergence of regional hegemony in Eurasia, and US policy for Ukraine has to be put in this larger context. A recent Congressional Research Service document explains:

Most of the world's people, resources, and economic activity are located ... [in] Eurasia. In response to this basic feature of world geography, US policymakers for the last several decades have chosen to pursue, as a key element of US national strategy, a goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemony in Eurasia. - [Defense primer: geography, strategy, and US force design](#) (April 19, 2022)

In 1997, Zbig Brzezinski, a key figure in US foreign policy for several decades (of Polish-Ukrainian origin), published *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geopolitical Imperatives*. He wrote: "Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a *geopolitical pivot* because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia" (emphasis added).

In 2013, Carl Gershman, director of National Endowment for Democracy (NED), wrote: "Ukraine is the biggest prize." He explained that if it could be pulled away from Russia and into the West, "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

The long-held US aim has been to pull Ukraine away from Russia, as a major step towards constraining Russian influence, and Chinese influence too, thereby sustaining US primacy on the global scale.

It is testimony to the US's continuing hegemony that it has mobilized such a concerted response among Western states in defence of Ukraine, including withdrawal of major Western companies from Russia, even McDonalds.

(3) For many years before the invasion, the Russian state was primed to conquer Ukraine and make it what one ideologist in the 1990s described as "a purely administrative sector of the Russian centralized state". Why? Because "Ukrainian sovereignty", he said, was a "huge danger to all of Eurasia".

Jane Burbank, emeritus professor of history and Russian and Slavic studies at New York University, reminds us, "Since the 1990s, plans to reunite Ukraine and other post-Soviet states into a trans-continental superpower have been brewing in Russia. A revitalized theory of Eurasian empire informs Mr Putin's every move" (2022).

Russia's recent strategy towards Ukraine cannot be understood purely as a defence against Western hostility, as in the US grand strategy described earlier. As the Russian economy has stagnated and Putin has lost popular support over the past decade, he has ramped up hostility towards the West, drawing on the oldest generalization in sociology, "an external enemy can be used to build internal solidarity".

So, is NATO ultimately to blame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine? No and yes.

WHO IS TO BLAME, PUTIN OR NATO?: "THE COLOUR OF TRUTH IS GREY"

Dr. Julie Newton

Is NATO to blame for Russian invasion of Ukraine? That was one of the questions we were posed, but the answer is far more complicated than the question suggests and has been oversimplified in the debates between those on the one side who suggest it's all security concerns, and those on the other who suggest that the war stems entirely from the nature of the Russian regime or its national identity and ideas.

The reality is that such mono-causal explanations are too narrow, inadequate, and thus misleading, causing us to misdiagnose the sources of the problem--with negative consequences for our policy prescriptions. I propose a more eclectic, complex explanation of what has happened. It's not one thing or the other, but a multitude of interconnected inputs. It is more what Mondrian, the artist, suggested: "the colour of truth is grey".

It is Putin and the system that he built that "pulled the trigger", unleashing a horrific and unjustifiable war on Ukraine. But all sides – including Russia, the US and even the EU – bear some degree of responsibility (albeit in varying proportions) over the past 25 years for assembling the gun which led to the strategic deadlock of 2014 – a deadlock that became more acrimonious and entrenched over the next 7 years until Putin fired the bullets.

Analytically, it is more fruitful to view the path to 2014 as a 25-year action-reaction downward slide in Russia-West relations, driven on all sides by foreign and domestic causes, material and ideational factors. It was a negative interaction among multiple factors, including security dilemmas, unaddressed conflicts of interest, legacies of the Soviet collapse, the role of national identity, emotions, perceptions and misperceptions, coupled with Russia's gradual descent starting in 1993 back towards authoritarianism and now repressive dictatorship.

The war in Ukraine is an extension and exacerbation of these complex forces, but war was not inevitable. It was ultimately the result of Putin's decision to roll the dice. To understand

why Putin and his party chose war, it's important to look at the Kremlin narrative through *their* lens.

Since Peter the Great, Russia has defined its national security strategy in terms of great power status. This striving for great power is not just some Russian psychological or cultural complex; it is their strategy to ensure national security against perceived and real threats, both internal and external.

Critically, over the last 25 years, this great power status has been draining away from Russia – economically, militarily, psychologically – and a weaker Russia perceives increasing dangers inside and outside the country. All this exacerbated Russian threat perceptions.

In Putin's eyes, the epicenter of those threats was Ukraine. Ukraine is where the US would "take out Russia", as Lavrov puts it, by turning Ukraine into US "bridgehead" to weaken Russia forever and even to break Russia up.

For Russia to gain the great power needed to push back at the US, Putin believes that the only way is to revise the international system-together with China. This is now more possible than ever before because, the Kremlin believes, the US and the West are in terminal decline. Their structural decline offers Russia and China the opportunity, with the support of the Global South, to contest and revise the US-led international system in ways that would increase Russia's relative power vis-à-vis the US hegemon on the world stage, and crucially, in its own backyard.

The way Putin has pursued this goal has shifted over time. After 2012, Putin moved from railing against Western expansionism as geopolitical and geoeconomic threats to stressing more ideational factors, such as European civilizational threats and Russia's civilizational entitlements. More recently, Putin turned to the idea of 'historical justice' in pursuit of restoring traditional RU lands and evicting the US/EU/NATO. For him today, the 'historical justice' argument even overrides international law. Far from Russian exceptionalism to reclaim great power status, Russia has now become an irredentist power.

Added to this is a Russian vision of new world order based on what Putin and Xi call "civilizational pluralism" and equality for all nations beleaguered by US hegemony.

To the Global South, especially to Europe's former colonies, Putin has, paradoxically, presented this Russian imperial land-grab as a way to fight against imperialism. Indeed, large parts of the non-West (though not Eurasia) have not repudiated Moscow. And the future of the international system has now become linked to the outcome of the Russo-Ukraine war. Putin must not be allowed to prevail. But once the bombs stop, we will need to re-examine the multiplicity of forces that led to 2014 and beyond to avoid repeating the past.

THE UKRAINE CRISIS: A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Zhao Hai

The Ukraine crisis is very challenging to China. China's position is not exactly neutral but trying to be as balanced as it could. China does not support Russia's special military operation, because China fundamentally opposes any military solutions to international affairs, and because as a permanent UN security-council member, China must uphold UN Charters and the relevant international law. As a result, China has not recognized lands seized by Russia in 2008 and 2014, nor will China recognize the results of the referendums in Eastern Ukraine.

China however cannot support the NATO position either, because China believes that NATO should not continue to exist and that it is a source of instability and conflict in the post-Cold War world. The neighboring countries of Russia joining NATO may give them security, but the dilemma is that Russia's hostility will also rise given its security concerns are not properly addressed. Considering all the above, China chose to stand with the developing world, calling out the double standard of those former colonial states, calling for a negotiated fair and peace deal, while maintaining normal ties with all parties involved in the conflict. China's position maybe deemed as "pro-Russia" by some or "impractical" by others, but in the long run, Europe's peace will not dawn without meaningful reconciliation with Russia.

Chinese have different historical and contemporary experiences with the parties in the Ukraine conflict, therefore do not share the emotions of many Europeans. The people of China have mixed feelings about the Russians over the past 200 years, ranging from an "armed robber" to a treaty ally or "big brother" to a revisionist traitor to a strategic partner. Many Chinese sympathize with the Ukrainians but dislike their government's hotheaded embracing of NATO membership. It's also quite natural for most Chinese to watch the ongoing saga through the prism of heightened China-US rivalry, and remember the last Chinese popular experience in a European war ended up with the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Consequently, the Chinese perspective and position on the Russian-Ukraine war regrettably alienated some Europeans, but for China, that's the best and the most consistent way to respond to this global crisis.

Many in the West misread the joint statement by China and Russian on February 4th as Chinese endorsement of the ensuing Russian actions. The real consensus between China and Russia was that the world is not and should not be built upon unitary modernity. From the "End of History" to the rise of BRICS, what's significant is not any resemblance of "clash of civilizations", but a call for plural modernity and an end of modern caste system of nation states. The post-Cold War international order failed in several respects to accommodate

developing countries' political systems, security needs and economic interests, let alone culture and racial equality. Although, Beijing's call for mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win solution repeatedly fall on deaf ears, China continues to partially benefit from the current international order and believing in progressive reforms. Moscow, on the other hand, reached its inflection point.

Despite setbacks on the battlefields, Putin's Russia has crossed the Rubicon and officially ended "Pax Americana". The next international order hinges on the outcome of the Ukraine conflict and the ability of Europeans to build a real strategic autonomy with comprehensive, common, and indivisible security. Meanwhile, dual changes will happen both within national borders and without, in the form of domestic polarization and international arms race from America, Europe to Asia. For now, the shadow of a nuclear war is lingering upon the world, and it looks like Europe is walking back into history, the analogy being the Crimean War, WWI, WWII, or the Cold War. We will face extremely hazardous times, but crises always breed opportunities, changes and new ideas, particularly contributions from the Global South that are gradually freed from Eurocentric orientalism and regained wisdom from their own history. China is striving to take the lead in building a better world, starting with the Global Security Initiative and the Global Development Initiative, both aimed at refocusing international community towards common challenges for humanity.

DISCONTENTS ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM AFRICA

Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi

For a continent that has been a site for various kinds of conflict and whose peoples have known war and instability, it is not too difficult to feel a deep sense of regret that the situation that led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was allowed to deteriorate into a full-blown military confrontation. It is even more regrettable that after the conflict burst out, not enough energy is being invested in seeking a truce that will allow for political negotiations to take precedence. On both sides of the conflict, actions have been taken and propaganda messages have been pumped out which effectively have meant an escalation of the conflict to a point of even threatening a possible nuclear confrontation.

In the quest to punish and isolate Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, massive efforts were invested by the West to recruit solidarity and support from around the world, including Africa. Ordinarily, opinion in Africa was and remains mixed about the propriety or otherwise of the action taken by Russia, there was a feeling of extreme discomfort in some key policy circles on the continent about the manner in which pressure - and even subtle threats - were

deployed to get Africa to toe the line defined by the West. Some officials complained about feeling like they were being "bullied", "hectoring", "insulted", etc.

In the face of pressures to stand against Russia, several points integral to African perspectives on the war came to the fore in public pronouncements. First, Africa countries are completely free to take any position without owing anybody in Brussels, London, Moscow, Kiev, or Washington an apology or an explanation. It is a sovereign right and prerogative enjoyed by all members of the international community and African countries are free to exercise choice in any and all global matters without having to live in fear of reprisals. Also, no country should arrogate to itself the right or the power to choose friends - and enemies - for another.

Secondly, there was a feeling that those Western countries that have pressured Africa to stand up to Russia to ensure a collective defence of a rules-based global order forget that Africa has itself been a repeated victim of the violation of international rules by some of the very same countries that were now preaching about such rules to them. The West has shown severally since 1945 that Might is Right in the world. Fresh in the memories of many African leaders and opinion makers was the unilateral bombardment of Libya by NATO to get rid of Muammar Ghaddafi, against the wishes of the African Union. The unilateral path taken by NATO resulted in the destruction of Libya and produced adverse collateral consequences across the Sahel.

Furthermore, the arguments by the West for the protection of a rules-based order smacks of hypocrisy, double standards, and a lack of consistency. It cannot be right to speak of global rules and order only when the interests of the West are seriously threatened. And to preach rules and order to a group of countries that have been at the receiving end of various violations is to be one-sidedly self-absorbed and insensitive. In this regard, it cannot be that when Europe has a problem, it must willy-nilly be accepted and treated by all but when African has a problem, it is reduced to a localised matter among competing "tribes" and/or warlords and couched in pejorative narratives that are as unhelpful as they demean.

Additionally, for many an African observer, there is too much that has gone wrong with the post-1945 global multilateral system. For decades now, African countries have been united in their calls for the reform of the system, including permanent representation for the continent in the Security Council. These calls have, however, not been treated with the kind of reform-minded attention required as the principal beneficiaries from the asymmetric power relations embedded in the system have stalled every push for change. Reforming the system for greater equity is still a live concern for Africa; a reformed system will also be a harbinger of global order, ensuring that all members of the international community are equally accountable for their actions.

The sanctions imposed on Russia by the West and Russia's countermeasures have added to already existing supply chain challenges brought about by Covid-19, posing threats to food

security, macro-economic stability, and political order in African countries that are very dependent on wheat, maize, fertiliser, and gas. Shortages and associated price inflation very quickly translated into severe stresses on individual and household welfare which, if not curbed, could translate into political protests.

The quest to manage the adverse effects of the war on economy and politics in Africa has, in some respects, reinforced the posture of "neutrality" and policy of pragmatism which has been adopted by many countries. It also feeds into a wish not to allow the continent to become a battle ground for a new East-West Cold War. There is an expectation that the United Nations, working in concert with some member states, will intensify diplomatic efforts to achieve a ceasefire and avert a possible nuclear catastrophe.

INDIA'S APPROACH TO UKRAINE WAR: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Mr. Praveen Donthi¹

As a rising aspirational middle power, India's approach to international relations has been blunt realism. In the words of current foreign minister of India, "What India seeks in its foreign policies is many friends, few forces, great good will, more influence, and that must be achieved through the Indian way." When it comes to Ukraine war, the Indian way is strategic autonomy.

India sees the Ukraine war as "a war between Russia and the NATO group" (as in the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi). That is why when the war broke out, the Indian government only focused on evacuating Indian students studying in Ukrainian universities, rather than condemning Russia. It continues to hold on to its position despite severe pressure from the West.

Several factors have influenced India's stance in the Russia-Ukraine war. First, India and Russia share a special and privileged strategic relationship that goes back to the Cold War. At the heart of this relationship is military-technical cooperation. 60-70% of India's arms and defense systems are of Russian origin, including India's nuclear technology. Russia has helped India with nuclear submarines and nuclear power plants, etc., which was difficult for India to get from the West. Therefore, there is a positive public sentiment in India towards Russia, which explains why the Indian public is mostly indifferent to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

¹ This short piece (India's perspective) was initially summarized by Rachel Liu from Mr. Donthi's webinar presentation and later edited by the author himself. Rachel is an OXGS Research Assistant and a MPhil student in Politics at Oxford University.

Secondly, India needs Russia to counterbalance China, with which India has a long and unsettled land borderline. The India-Russia relationship has been largely shaped by the historical dynamics and tensions in the Russia-China-India relationship. In the beginning, India took a non-aligned position. But in 1962, when China and India went to war — and China defeated India — India could not afford to remain neutral anymore on the global stage and started to seek arms from the United States. Later in 1971, the Sino-US relationship started to thaw, mediated by Pakistan. In the same year, India fought another war with Pakistan and quickly signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union to keep China from supporting Pakistan in the war, and that paid off.

There is a belief among the Indian strategy community that the “no-limits friendship” between Russia and China might not stand the test of time because the Chinese influence is growing in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Right now, as Russia experiences some military reverses in Ukraine and the war drags on, India is closely watching. If Russia loses this war or comes out weaker, China will become the dominant partner in this bilateral relationship, which is not going to bode well for India. During the Cold War, Russia used India to counterbalance China. Currently, India needs Russia to counterbalance China as much as the US needs India to counterbalance China.

Another main foreign policy concern of India is its western neighbor Pakistan. On the day Russia invaded Ukraine, the then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Moscow. For India, the threat of China and Pakistan coming together with Russia is real. This also means India could not afford to take the Eurocentric line.

These factors have driven India's decision-making regarding the Ukraine war. Both US and Russia said that they understood India's position. Though there has been a lot of criticism of India for importing Russian crude oil as India's moral ambiguity, the Indian Foreign Minister has been pushing back quite aggressively, saying that it was essential for the Indo-pacific strategy to discard a Eurocentric perspective.

In conclusion, India is a liberal democracy, but not in a Western sense. At the end of the day, it is looking out for its own strategic interests. India is not going to blindly take the Western line or the American line, but to take its own line. It has paid dividends and since India has close relations with both Russia and the West, the world is now asking whether India could broker peace between Russia and Ukraine.