

The west v Russia: why the global south isn't taking sides

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The map of global participation in the sanctions against Russia suggests a new non-aligned movement might be on the rise

On 2 March, as the number of Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia's brutal invasion reached 1 million, the United Nations security council called an emergency session of the general assembly. There, 193 nations reviewed a resolution on Russia's "aggression against Ukraine" and voted overwhelmingly to approve it: 141 votes in favor, 35 abstentions and just five votes against. Even some of Russia's closest allies on the continent - Serbia, for example, or Hungary - voted to condemn the invasion. "The message of the general assembly is loud and clear," [said](#) the UN secretary-general, António Guterres.

What exactly is that message? In recent days, many commentators have pointed to a global map of the UN resolution to demonstrate the unity of the west and the world in taking on the Putin government. But to make sense of the geopolitical consequences of the Russian invasion, we must look beyond the diplomatic theater of the general assembly to examine how these nations are actually engaged with the war in this phase of rapid escalation. And to do that, we should start with a very different map of the world - a map of global participation in the sanctions set against [Russia](#) by the United States and its allies.

The contrast between these maps could not be more striking. The US, the UK, Canada, South Korea, Switzerland, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Singapore, the EU: beyond this fortified coalition, very few nations have chosen to take part in the economic warfare set against the Putin government. On the contrary, many of the world's largest nations - including China, India, Brazil, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and even Nato ally Turkey - have refused to join in. "We will not blindly follow the steps taken by another country," [said](#) Indonesia's foreign ministry representative at a recent press conference.

Latin America has been equally steadfast in its commitment to neutrality. "We do not consider that [this war] concerns us," [said](#) the Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. "We are not going to take any sort of economic reprisal because we want to have good relations with all governments." Argentina may have voted to condemn Russia's actions at the UN, but its foreign minister, Santiago Cafiero, was [adamant](#) about his country's non-participation in the new sanctions push: "Argentina does not consider that they are a mechanism to generate peace and harmony, or generate a frank dialogue table that serves to save lives."

The Latin American position has been echoed in Africa. "For five centuries, we have been pawns in the hands of the warring European states, bent on looting Africa of its human and natural sources," says Pierre Sané, president of the Imagine Africa Institute and former secretary-general of Amnesty International. Sané tells me that the embassy in Ukraine has been recruiting "volunteer" mercenaries from countries like Senegal and Ivory Coast to fight in the war. "Should this war in

Ukraine escalate, we say and we say it loud: do not bring it to our shores.”

Amid the Russian army’s brutal advance into Ukraine, a slew of [letters](#), [articles](#) and Twitter commentary has addressed the “western left” for its apparent unwillingness to take on the Putin government. The invasion of Ukraine has been described as a “[test](#)” to root out the “[pseudo-leftists](#)” who fail to respond with force and conviction to support the west in its effort to isolate, undermine and eventually topple Putin in defense of the Ukrainian cause.

But the map of sanctions suggests that the true rift is not between left and right, nor even between east and west. On the contrary, the map reveals a rift between north and south, between the nations that we call developed and those we call developing. And by revealing this tectonic shift, the map can tell us something important about geopolitics in the coming age of multipolarity.

The rapid rise of China and the US reaction it has provoked have prompted many commentators to predict a coming cold war. Few expected Vladimir Putin to kick it off so suddenly. “Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has ended Americans’ 30-year holiday from history,” [writes](#) the former CIA director Robert Gates for the Washington Post. The immediate eviction of Russian representatives and Russian culture from the institutions of the west suggest the long slumber of the cold war may indeed be over: “Putin’s war has provided the cold shower needed to awaken democratic governments to the reality of a new world.”

The good news for Gates is that the Biden administration has already found its cold war footing. Its flagship Summit for Democracy strives to unite “[the nations of the free world](#)” – a remarkable homage to the [era of anti-Soviet mobilization](#) – while isolating autocracies like Russia and China. That is, with the usual exceptions: Saudi Arabia’s oil, for example, grants the nation a free pass to the “free world”, as made evident by the recent delegation dispatched by the Biden administration to secure the kingdom’s support to keep the oil flowing through the war effort in Ukraine.

In the age of unipolarity – in the long 30-year holiday that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union – the nations of the world were given a rather simple choice: side with the United States, or stand alone. Some nations sought to band together in collective acts of resistance to this hegemonic power. But the consequences were all but inevitable: invasions, coups and extensive sanctions to isolate their economies from the world at large.

As new powers generate new poles, however, the options available to US neighbor nations are no longer restricted to compliance and resistance. A third option emerges: neutrality. “Neutrality does not mean indifference,” says Pierre Sané. “Neutrality means continuously calling for the respect of international laws; neutrality means that our hearts still go to the victims of military invasions and arbitrary sanctions never imposed on [Nato](#) countries.”

Back in the first cold war, neutrality had a name: non-alignment. As the United States clashed with China and the Soviet Union in the skies above Korea, Jawaharlal Nehru and Josip Broz Tito refused to take a side. “The people of Yugoslavia cannot accept the postulate that humanity today has only one choice – a choice between a domination of one or the other bloc,” Yugoslavia’s minister of foreign affairs, Edvard Kardelj, [told](#) the UN in 1950. “We believe that there exists another road.” The Non-Aligned Movement was born five years later, uniting more than 100 nations around the world around principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence.

Today, nations around the world are called again to take sides – between Russia and the west, and very soon between the west and China. But as the map of sanctions attests, the cross-pressure between these great powers may once again spark a movement for non-alignment, demanding a more universal application of international law against demands for unilateral exception.

There will no doubt be consequences for this neutral position. Non-aligned nations in the first cold war were frequently victim to aggression, invasion and [economic embargo](#). The same risks to neutrality are visible today. Lithuania recently [canceled](#) a shipment of Covid vaccines to Bangladesh for its refusal to condemn Russia at the United Nations. The US, for its part, has already passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (Caatsa), giving license to [punish countries with sanctions for trading with the other side](#).

But as great powers prepare for a new century of war, the call for non-alignment will only grow louder. Our task is to understand that call now as Tito and Nehru understood it then: not as "neutralism" or "passivity, as is sometimes alleged". As they wrote in a joint declaration in 1954: "It represents the positive, active and constructive policy that, as its goal, has collective peace as the foundation of collective security."

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