

# **Ukraine war: Sub-Imperialist positioning, not “anti-colonial consciousness,” behind the neutrality of reactionary elites in the Global South**

Monday 16 January 2023, by [KARADJIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2023).

**Time and time again, we have been told that ‘the Global South’ - ie, the developing world consisting largely of former colonies - does not support Ukraine’s resistance to Russia’s barbaric colonial invasion, or is even supportive of Russia. According to this rendition of reality, support for Ukraine is entirely a project of the imperial West, and this very fact is all the more reason that former colonies of western imperialist states do not want to be on the side of their former colonial masters.**

Quite apart from the problematic mathematics involved - 140 countries voted to condemn the Russian invasion, the vast majority of which are in the Global South, and only 5 voted against - there is a more significant problem here: the conflation of ruling classes, governments and often dictatorships with the people of these countries, as if people being gunned down by some regime of exploiters would automatically have the same opinions as their oppressors, because they’re all ‘Global Southerners’. While such a boringly pedestrian assumption is normal in mainstream mass media and bourgeois political discourse, it ought to be second nature to anyone proclaiming some kind of socialist or even vaguely left or progressive ideology that such discourse is inconceivable nonsense.

“Only white nations are supporting Ukraine, the black and brown peoples of the world refuse to support ‘NATO’s war’ against Russia” I have been informed by western leftists, assuming to be speaking on behalf of several billion people in several continents, when in fact only speaking on behalf of their torturers.

This essay will first look at the facts of who voted what and why, and will note the largely sub-imperial nature of major states which either abstained on voting to condemn Russia, or formally voted to condemn but were in other respects pro-Russian in practice; and then will compare this to the overwhelmingly anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian views of their populations, belying the claims that these abstentions were “reflective” of alleged “anti-colonial” views among the peoples of the South. This will be done via examining a variety of surveys of popular opinion. While it is difficult to vouch for the validity and reliability of these surveys without much deeper research, nevertheless their variety itself, together with the largely similar results, suggests somewhat tentative conclusions can be drawn.

## **First, the facts**

Before we look at what people actually think, let’s first establish the facts regarding the votes of these countries and the views of the governments and ruling elites, because the assertions are not

even borne out on this level.

Like most myths, these assertions are based on bits and pieces of truths and half-truths. Both the UN General Assembly vote to [condemn the Russian invasion in March](#), and the more recent one to [condemn Russia's outright theft of a fifth of Ukraine](#), were supported by over 140 countries and opposed by 5, while some 35 countries in each case abstained. Since nearly all the 30 or so 'white' nations of the Global North (European countries, North America, Australasia) voted to condemn, it means all of those who abstained were from the Global South – even if they were vastly outnumbered by the overwhelming majority of South countries who voted to condemn. Of the 5 who voted against both times, two were 'white' Global North countries – Russia and Belarus, of course – while 3 were from the South: Assad's genocide-regime in Syria, which relies on Putin for its existence, the grotesque 'Juche' regime in North Korea, and, the first time, the extremely repressive dictatorship in Eritrea, and second time, Ortega's turncoat regime in Nicaragua.

In other words, even just on this basis, we can say that, within the Global South, over 100 nations condemned the invasion and annexations, while three supported them.

However, it is also more complicated than that, because the reasons that countries vote in favour or abstain can have many dimensions; while, as we will see, some of those which abstained, such as Modi's regime in India, did so because they actually sympathise with Moscow, many others may have had no such sympathy, but for diplomatic or economic reasons – associated with being relatively poor – felt they could not openly vote to condemn Russia, often due to some important economic relationship with Russia, or with China.

Meanwhile, the other core of truth is that it has only been western countries that have sent arms to Ukraine, and have activated economic sanctions on Russia, despite the overwhelming votes to condemn Russia's invasion. However, this is hardly surprising for many reasons: the major arms suppliers (and producers) in any conflict are richer countries (western countries and Russia), and are wealthy enough to provide large quantities. It is also only countries of the Global North who can afford the pain to themselves of sanctions on a large country such as Russia, whereas in the South imposing sanctions would often mean impossible pain, especially given the importance of Russia in the global food, fertiliser and energy markets; while also endangering economic links and projects which they have built up with Russia, just as they have with the US and western countries; finally, the Ukraine war is in Europe, so it is logical that European nations have more of a direct stake than others, in the same way that African nations all opposed the Apartheid regime in South Africa and all Arab states give official support to Palestine.

### **The ambivalent sub-imperialist belt**

While, as we will see, some abstaining countries are simple Russian neo-colonies under forms of violent occupation (eg, Mali, Central African Republic), there is a bloc of relatively powerful states that either abstained on all votes (China, India, Iran, South Africa), abstained on some votes ([Brazil](#), [United Arab Emirates](#), both in Security Council votes), or officially voted to condemn to satisfy their Washington connections, but in practice have acted in every possible way to demonstrate the importance they place upon their ties with Moscow and lack of commitment to their votes (Israel, Saudi Arabia and to some extent Turkey).

With the exception of Turkey, which has supplied Bakhtiar drones to Ukraine, none of the other "US allies" in the Middle East (Israel, UAE, Saudis) have either helped supply Ukraine with arms, or imposed sanctions on Russia. After the West imposed oil sanctions on Russia, driving the price of oil through the roof, the US aimed to get its Saudi and Gulf allies to increase oil supply to stabilise prices; at the time, Saudi and Emirati leaders reportedly [declined U.S. requests to speak to](#)

[Mr. Biden](#).” Following Biden’s low-key July visit to Saudi Arabia in the hope of getting the Saudis on board, they responded in October by leading OPEC into [cutting oil production by 2m barrels a day](#), keeping prices high to their own, and Russia’s, benefit. To double the insult, the Saudis rounded out the year with the [lavish welcome to China’s Xi Jinping](#) in December, signing a “strategic partnership.” As for Turkey, “not joining sanctions to keep diplomacy open” apparently includes agreeing to Russia’s plan to [turn Turkey into a Russian gas hub](#), while blocking the NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland.

In Israel’s case, former (and again current) far-right leader Benjamin [Netanyahu long cultivated close ties with Putin](#), so not surprisingly, his equally ultra-rightist successor, prime minister [Naftali Bennett, was the first “world leader”](#) to make a high level visit to Moscow to meet Putin soon after the invasion. Bennett’s first statement affirmed Ukraine’s right to sovereignty, but [made no mention of Russia](#). Following US pressure, foreign minister and more “centrist” Zionist Yair Lapid issued the official, half-hearted condemnation, but Bennett refused to mention Putin or Russia in subsequent statements, and issued a [demand that his ministers say nothing](#); rejected Ukraine’s calls for arms, and promised to [block any attempt by Baltic states](#) to send Israeli-made arms to Ukraine. His equally fascistic minister Avigdor [Lieberman later refused to condemn Russia](#) following the Bucha massacre, claiming “I support first of all Israeli interests.” [Israel also blocked the US from providing Israeli ‘iron dome’](#) missile-shield technology to Ukraine, as Russian missiles obliterate Ukraine. After Israel’s refusal of a US request to co-sponsor a UN Security Council move to put a motion to condemn Russia to the General Assembly [caused rebuke from Washington](#), Israel voted in favour at the General Assembly, Bennett explaining that Russia understood Israel’s forced stand, and [Russia affirmed](#) this would not affect cooperation in Syria. When Lapid replaced Bennet as prime minister late in the year, he was more openly critical of Russia, but refused to supply weaponry. Meanwhile, [Netanyahu’s far-right Likud opposition](#) spent the year criticising the government for saying anything at all, and in its first statement, the new Netanyahu government promises to [“speak less in public”](#) about Ukraine.

These are not countries that have the excuse of being poor and hence having little bargaining power – Israel is an unquestionably ‘Northern’ economy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are oil superpowers, and Turkey is a member of the OECD, and, for that matter, of NATO. Their actions are clearly choices: does this mean Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey are an ‘anti-colonial’ vanguard? Alongside, within Europe itself, the far-right regime of Orban in Hungary, Putin’s best friend in NATO, which almost alone in Europe stands against sanctions on Russia and arms to Ukraine? And when we add other countries ruled by far-right reactionaries like Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil, who are allied both to the US and to Putin’s Russia, we further see the problem with the alleged ‘anti-imperialist’ explanation for going soft on Russia.

We often hear that, despite the numbers in the UN votes, “the majority of the world” abstained and hence refused to condemn Moscow, because between them, China and India, make up two fifths of the world, so when we add other large abstaining countries such as Iran and Pakistan, as well as Brazil which, despite voting to condemn, has rejected sanctions while Bolsonaro declared his “deep solidarity” with Russia in Moscow on the eve of the invasion, we are covering more than half the world’s population.

But that’s where the nonsense peaks: as the mullah regime in Iran guns down hundreds of women and young people demonstrating against tyranny in the streets every day, we are asked to assume that those being shot, tortured, brutally oppressed, have the same opinion on Ukraine as the regime killing them. That Iranian Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and other oppressed minorities have the same view as their oppressors. That the Muslim population of Gujarat must have the same view as Modi’s Hindu-chauvinist regime, where Modi himself was involved in the huge pogrom in that state back in 2002. That oppressed Indian women, Dalits and minorities all agree with the BJP’s votes in the UN,

alongside the world's largest population living in absolute poverty – yes, of course, they all must agree with the Indian petty-bourgeoisie aggressively proclaiming its pro-Moscow views on the Internet. That the millions in Xinjiang suffering under China's regime of forced assimilation and cultural genocide must all agree with the regime imposing this upon them, alongside the hundreds of millions of China's insecure 'floating population' of exploited workers, they of course must agree with their exploiters.

The sheer idiocy of such assumptions should stare anyone in the face. That such class-free analysis could ever be considered by anyone claiming left-wing or socialist politics simply underlines the ideological bankruptcy of much of the Old Left (ie, the degeneration of what was once the 'New Left').

Rather, what these countries and governments have in common – China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel – is their sub-imperialist (or in some cases arguably imperialist) nature. Far from their positions on the war reflecting any "anti-colonial" consciousness of their people (or reflecting their oppressed and exploited peoples at all), they rather reflect the geopolitical positioning, their global bargaining position, between US, European, Russian and Chinese imperialism, taking advantage of the war to assert their own sub-imperial interests, regional influence and conquests, and oppressive rule over internal and local colonies.

**Yes: there is western hypocrisy! Yes, the world's peoples remember colonialism!**

OK, but are not some of the points being made valid in themselves? Of course, it is true that the western imperialist powers supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russian occupation are hypocritical. None have the same view regarding Israel's decades-long brutal and illegal occupation of Palestine, and the Golan, and its massive violation of the most elementary human rights of the Palestinians. While some European governments might offer more criticism compared to the unconditional and uncritical support for Israel by the US, there is never a hint of sanctions or breaking ties. We can name any number of other examples, such as Saudi Arabia's monstrous bombing of Yemen, where western reactions can similarly range from condemnation to support, but even in the cases most condemned, there are no penalties.

The same goes for Russia's previous actions: neither Putin's slaughter of the Chechens, the horrific bombing of hospitals, schools, markets in Syria on behalf of Assad's genocide regime, nor the 2014 annexation of Crimea, evoked the kind of reaction we see now in Ukraine.

Then there are conflicts in which huge numbers of people are killed, such as the two-year genocidal assault on Tigray by Ethiopia and Eritrea, killing 600,000 people, which both western governments and media treat with complete indifference. Not surprisingly, many Africans would have been offended when French minister of state, Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, [demanded "solidarity from Africa"](#) because of Russia's "existential threat" to Europe.

And of course, there is the vastly different treatment of millions of Ukrainian refugees in Europe compared to that of refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa.

In this sense we can say the Ukrainians are 'lucky' (if such a term can be used for a people being invaded and bombed) compared to others in terms of western support. Western powers act based on their own interests, just as Russia does, and this may rarely coincide with the interests of justice. It is not the fault of Ukrainian men, women and children getting bombed and killed in apartment blocks that the West is more supportive of them than of other struggles. They have a right to resist and to get aid from wherever its offered, as do all peoples fighting liberation and resistance wars.

But the argument that rejection of western hypocrisy is the reason for the ambivalent stance of many governments in the Global South is very problematic. Many of these ambivalent governments are violently oppressive, and don't really care less about western hypocrisy or alleged 'principles'; they are often leaders in hypocrisy themselves. In fact, often it is the very beneficiaries of western hypocrisy – such as those just mentioned above, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia – which either abstained, rejected western sanctions or otherwise carried out actions that benefited Russia in practice; they have good relations with both imperialist blocs. As for the contention that their stance is a reflection of 'anti-imperialist' views among the people they oppress, there is little or no correspondence with popular opinion as will be demonstrated below.

A similar contention is that the ambivalent views of some South governments reflect anti-colonial sentiment: the western governments now supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russian colonialism were previously the colonialists ruling over the peoples of the South. In itself, this could lead to sympathy for Ukrainians fighting the same anti-colonial fight they once did; but since Russian colonialism expanded across northern Eurasia, not in Africa, southern Asia or Latin America where other colonial rulers were, it may not be so obvious the southern peoples. But again, the idea that many of these reactionary, violent and pro-imperialist regimes are expressing anti-colonial principles is laughable.

### **What about the people of the South?**

The idea that the views and UN votes of the collection of thuggish reactionary regimes listed above represent the views of the people they oppress is unlikely by definition, at least for anyone who understands the concept of class analysis. What is the evidence of any correspondence between the policies of this minority of southern governments and the alleged "anti-colonial" views of their people, which are allegedly expressed via *supporting* Russia's *colonial* invasion of Ukraine?

### **Brazil**

An interesting place to start may be Brazil; since both the outgoing, far-right Bolsonaro regime, and the incoming, soft-left, Lula administration, have been very partial to Putin and Russia's viewpoint. Bolsonaro was always strongly allied to Putin (and to Trump), seeing both an ideological ally and an important trading partner. On the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, Bolsonaro turned up in Moscow to declare his "[deep solidarity](#)" with Russia! While his government went through the motions of voting to condemn the invasion in the General Assembly, Bolsonaro himself [blasted that stand](#), and claimed Ukrainians "[trusted a comedian with the fate of a nation](#)." Later, [Brazil abstained in the UN Security Council](#) vote in September to condemn the annexations. Meanwhile, as the West sanctioned Russia, [Brazil-Russia trade ballooned](#). As for Lula, he criticised Russia's invasion but claimed [Ukraine was "as responsible" as Russia](#) and had not tried enough to negotiate with the aggressor.

Yet, according to 'Morning Consult', "the share of Brazilian adults with [a favorable view of Russia has plunged from 38% to 13%](#) since the day before its Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, while the share with an unfavorable view has surged from 28% to 59%." Meanwhile, 62 percent of Brazilians say they side with Ukraine, compared to only [6 percent who side with Russia](#). What this suggests is quite the opposite of "pressure from the masses" – both Bolsonaro and Lula, with differing ideological emphases, represent the views of the sub-imperialist BRICS ruling elite and the way it positions itself in the world, not at all the views of the Brazilian masses.

There's good reason to believe that this is the case throughout Latin America, "despite" (due to?) the strong anti-imperialist traditions throughout the region. Favourable views of Russia [are higher in Mexico than in Brazil](#), yet a late February poll in Mexico showed that only [20 percent of Mexicans](#)



[had a favourable view of Putin](#), and 60 percent an unfavourable view.

## **Southern Africa**

From Brazil, we may jump to another BRICS stalwart which has abstained on the UN resolutions condemning Russia, namely South Africa. In explaining South Africa's vote, almost every media article in the world has pointed to the "traditional ties" between the African National Congress, which led the fight against Apartheid, and the Soviet Union, pointing to Soviet support for the struggle. Perhaps the government's vote reflects this popular love for Moscow due to this historic struggle? As if Putin's Russia were the Soviet Union; Putin doesn't think so. Ukraine, of course, was also in the Soviet Union.

But here's the thing: according to a Gallup survey of Africans in 24 countries on their attitude to Russia conducted in 2021 (before the invasion), [only 30 percent of South Africans had a positive view of Russia, the second lowest on the continent](#) (the lowest was in Zambia). Even more interesting is the fact that the countries where people recorded lower support for the Russian leadership were mostly in the southern African region, eg, Tanzania (32%), Zimbabwe (39%), Namibia (40%), Mozambique (41%) - ie all countries which abstained, and are ruled by regimes associated with the Soviet-backed anti-colonial struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, connected to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Hence, where we may expect to see the highest support for Russia based on this 'anti-colonial' discourse, *we see the lowest* - by way of contrast, support for the Russian leadership in 2021 was largely between 50-70% throughout west Africa.

Bear in mind that all these figures, high and low, were from 2021; drastic drops in support for Russia have been recorded in *every part of the world* since February 2022. Keep this in mind if 30 percent still sounds high. Also worth keeping in mind is that while approval of the Russian government was on average higher in Africa (42%) than globally (33%), this was nevertheless "*lower than the approval ratings of the leadership of the U.S. (60%), China (52%) and Germany (49%)*" - not sure how we fit the square "anti-imperialist" peg into this round hole! Also notable is that even the 42% average approval for Russia in 2021 was drastically down from 57% in 2011, in the decade since Russia's global imperialist adventures have become more pronounced; we can be certain that 2022 has not helped.

This data also means that, despite the higher African average, the 30 percent approval in South Africa *is below the 33 percent global average*.

Therefore, we would probably need to draw the same conclusion about South Africa as about Brazil: far from representing the "anti-colonial" and "anti-apartheid" memories of the masses, the ANC government's vote represents, once again, the views of the sub-imperialist BRICS ruling elite and the way it positions itself in the world. The working classes and the poor in all these countries where the regimes are now close to Russia - South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique etc - are brutally exploited by the capitalist classes that arose out of the ANC, ZANU-PF, Frelimo, SWAPO, the MPLA etc. They apparently share little in terms of views with the sub-imperialist South African or the other neo-colonial regimes tied to South African, Russian, Chinese - and western - imperialism.

## **Western and northern Africa**

What about the higher approval of the Russian leadership in western Africa? [According to Eric Draitser](#), Russia gained support in parts of West Africa by moving in the last few years and ousting French imperialism from its dominant role there. This may well be true. According to the Gallup survey, 84 percent of people in Mali had confidence in Russia in 2021; while popular surveys under

military dictatorships are highly suspect, it is quite possible that the figure was in fact at the higher end, perhaps like the more realistic 50-70 percent area (as in Guinea, Cameroon, Congo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso etc). Did Mali's abstention, and those of the Central African Republic (CAR), and of a couple of other west African states (Guinea, Togo), represent the vanguard of anti-colonialism and this great surge of support for Russia replacing France?

The problem with one imperialist country replacing another is that initial welcome can easily become its opposite when the new power acts the same or worse. In the case of Mali and Central African Republic (CAR) in particular, the fact that this survey was before 2022 not only concerns the global crash in support for Russia following its invasion; it also concerns the Russian-backed dictatorships showing their horrifically brutal fangs in 2022.

Last November, the 'All Eyes on Wagner' group linked the Russian Wagner paramilitary force operating in Mali to at least [23 incidents of human rights abuse](#) since the 2020 coup, but the biggest massacres took place in March 2022, when the Malian military, backed by Wagner, [executed some 300 civilians](#) in small groups over several days in the town of Moura.

Similarly, in the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner mercenaries "enlisted to counter rebels since 2018 have abducted, tortured and killed people on an '[unabated and unpunished](#)' basis," according to [a UN report, which also claimed](#) a Russian company linked to Wagner "secured gold and diamond mining licenses." But once again, it was in March 2022 when the brutality hit a peak, when Wagner mercenaries in the CAR carried out a series of massacres around the site of a gold mine in the Andaha region, killing [more than 100 gold miners from Sudan, Chad, Niger and CAR](#).

Wagner began operating in Africa in 2017, invited initially by Sudanese tyrant Omar al-Bashir, who told Putin that Sudan was Russia's "[key to Africa](#)". In Sudan, Wagner secured gold mining concessions, and this lucrative business then spread to other countries of the region. This led to fierce competition with French imperialism in west Africa, but Russia's need for gold greatly increased following its invasion of Ukraine and imposition of western sanctions, a likely factor in the upturn on violent repression.

One wonders what the slaughtered villagers and gold-miners would think of the assertions floating around the western left that the abstention votes in the UN by their ruling Russian-backed dictators in Mali, CAR and Sudan represented their "anti-colonial" views, or simply the views of these dictators ruling Russian neo-colonies via the Nazi-linked Wagner plunderers and killers?

Meanwhile, another government which has twice abstained on these UN votes is that of Ethiopia, which has been waging a genocidal war against the people of Tigray for two years, [killing some 600,000 people](#), a horrific crime ignored by the world. If its abstention also signifies a pro-Russian orientation, is it really the voice of anti-colonial liberation? When the regime also has "[seemingly unconditional American praise and support](#)"? Did someone ask if its victims got a vote on their killers' UN vote? And its ally, the Eritrean dictatorship, which the Ethiopian regime invited into its country help it kill its own Tigrayan citizens because it knew it would do so with a vengeance, is the only African state to actually vote against the UN resolution in February; hardly surprising that the only country declaring itself 100 percent in the Russian camp is widely regarded as [one of the world's worst dictatorships](#), a one-man dictatorship of President Isaias Afewerki, "subjecting its population to widespread forced labor and conscription ... with no legislature, no independent civil society organizations or media outlets, and no independent judiciary," where elections have never been held since independence in 1993.

In fact, while it may be drawing a slightly long bow, the claim in [this Conversation article](#) - that the minority of African states that abstained from condemning the Russian invasion or annexations are

largely dictatorships (with the exception of South Africa), ie, the regimes most removed from any popular pressure, and vice versa – is not so far from the truth. Certainly there are exceptions – Egypt’s bloody al-Sisi dictatorship voted with the majority, but in fact it falls into the same camp as its Saudi and Emirati allies, ie, making the “correct” vote by Washington while doing everything to maintain its ties to Moscow; indeed, the long-planned [construction of Egypt’s first nuclear power plant by Russia](#) got underway in July.

## India

As we know, Modi’s India, which has close ties to both Putin’s Russia and to the US – seeing its main rival to be China – abstained on the UN resolutions and has maintained strong ties with Russia. For Modi, this is not only about traditional Russia-India ties, playing Russia against China and, once again, the global positioning of a BRICS sub-imperialist bourgeoisie, but also – as with Bolsonaro in Brazil – deeply ideological, Modi’s Hindu-supremacist BJP being strongly aligned with Putin’s far-right international.

This ideological commitment to Russia is more entrenched the further to the right one goes. Shortly after the invasion was launched, members of [extreme-right Hindu Sena demontsrated in support of Putin and the invasion](#). Demonstrators held signs reading “Russia, you fight, we are with you” and some called for an “undivided Russia.” Hindu Sena president Vishnu Gupta even advocated that India put “boots on the ground” to support Russia. Indeed, the concept of ‘Akhand Bharat’, “which envisions the entire Indian subcontinent, stretching from Afghanistan to Myanmar, as belonging to a single, “undivided” nation [with India at its core](#),” is supported by many on the Hindu-chauvinist far-right, strongly reminiscent of the Putinite and Duginite views that former parts of the Russian Empire all belong to Russia.

As the head of a Hindu-supremacist regime that has engaged in open violence against Indian Muslims, and of a deeply socially-chauvinist regime in a country where billionaires today grow on trees while India boasts the greatest number of absolute poor in the world, it is surely extraordinary that many “leftists” and even “socialists” would claim that Modi’s pro-Putin politics is somehow representative of the anti-colonial traditions of Modi’s brutally oppressed and impoverished subjects. “Most of the world” abstained, we hear, not just from common clueless liberals, but from those professing a class analysis, because between them India and China already make up two-fifths of the world!

It is somewhat difficult to discern Indian views on the conflict, and in such a large and diverse country the likelihood of polls capturing much of value is small. From what we have though, an Ipsos poll conducted in May found that, on the one hand, 6 in 10 Indians supported India maintaining relations with Russia and opposed India imposing economic sanctions, yet the same poll found that 77% of Indians believed that the economic sanctions imposed by others were “an effective tactic for stopping the war” and 7 in 10 believe [“doing nothing in Ukraine will embolden Russia to take the war to the rest of Europe and Asia.”](#) In a Blackbox Research survey in March, only four per cent of Indian respondents said they had a positive image of Moscow (and only eight per cent in China), and [91 percent in India said they supported or sympathised with Ukraine](#) (compared to an also surprisingly high 71 percent in China). Some 60 percent of Indians blamed Russia for the conflict, though only 10 percent in China did.

While difficult to know what all these polls prove, at face value they suggest that, despite some ambivalence, overall Indian people are more critical of Russia and sympathetic to Ukraine than the Modi regime. Where support for Russia and the government’s position seems apparently strong is [on social media](#), probably representing largely upper middle class Indian views. It is interesting to see what their views are based on; but from [this analysis](#), “anti-colonialist consciousness” does not even



get a mention. Rather, it is all about the “historic ties” between India and Russia (ie, blatant geopolitics), the fact that Russia is India’s major arms supplier, and in order [to stop Russia from bending too far towards China](#), which India sees as its [chief sub-imperial rival](#), despite both being part of the ‘BRICS’ framework. And all those masses of advanced weaponry that India buys from Russia are not aimed at fighting ... British colonialism, but China, Pakistan, the occupied Kashmiris and so on.

How ironic that India’s pro-Russian position on the war could be considered part of an “anti-colonial” or “anti-imperialist” position when the Russian weaponry, if aimed at China, is done so within the framework of India’s anti-China ‘Quad’ alliance with the US, Australia and Japan.

## China

As noted above, “between them India and China already make up two-fifths of the world” is a hipster-leftist meme that implies the abstentions of the BJP and CCP regimes represent their entire exploited and oppressed populations.

As with India, we don’t want to put too much store in surveys of relatively small numbers of people in a country of 1.4 billion; and in the case of China, discerning popular views is made more difficult by the almost total monopoly on media – including social media – by the regime; aside from North Korea, few countries in the world are as effective at suppressing independent social media as is China.

The Blackbox survey cited above for India also contains some alleged views from China. The survey found that a mere 8 percent of respondents had a positive image of Moscow, and a surprisingly high [71 percent in China said they supported or sympathised with Ukraine](#); on the other hand, only 10 percent of Chinese respondents blamed Russia for the conflict, dramatically lower than in India. What to make of this contradiction is unclear, especially given the context noted above, but we can make some general points.

Firstly, would it be logical to assume that the colonised Tibetan masses, or the largely Muslim, Turkic Uyghur, population of Xin Jiang, where a million people are subject to internment in forced assimilation facilities are likely to hold similar views to the Han-chauvinist regime? In a country which now boasts [1185 billionaires](#), more than the US, where “the net worth of the 153 members of China’s Parliament and its advisory body that it deems ‘super rich’ [amounts to \\$650 billion](#),” how likely is it that the brutally exploited, permanently insecure, floating population of rural-to-urban-to-rural migrant workers – [one fifth of China’s population](#) upon whose backs China’s “miracle” has been built – would tend to agree with their exploiters? Or that the CCP bureaucracy would “reflect” their views?

Secondly, does anyone really believe that China’s policy – on one hand, abstaining in UN votes and blaming ‘NATO’, on the other, continually sending pointed signals that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, [including Ukraine, must be respected](#)” – “reflects” anything other than the policy of an assertive new imperialist power? In his first trip abroad after the pandemic, to Kazakhstan – a former Soviet republic with a large Russian minority – Chinese leader Xi Jinping offered “[strong support to Kazakhstan](#) in protecting its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Despite the Russian ‘alliance’, Russia is inevitably also an imperialist rival, and [China prefers Russia in the position of vassal](#) rather than equal, a position Putin has offered up on a plate with his disastrous Ukraine invasion. Kazakhstan and the other central Asian states now see China, rather than Russia, as their key security guarantor. Xi’s major coup, the lavish state visit to Saudi Arabia in December, during which the two countries signed a “[comprehensive strategic partnership agreement](#)” and Chinese and Saudi firms signed 34 investment deals, represented a

major move into traditional American and more recently Russian territory; China was confident enough to declare itself in support of mainstream Gulf Arab positions as against both [Israeli](#) and [Iranian](#) positions, while expecting no issues with its strong relations with both those states as well. Xi declared the visit a “[defining event in the history of Chinese-Arab relations](#).” Meanwhile, with Putin’s invasion leading to the rupture of the enormous Russian-German economic relationship and the collapse of Nordstream, Germany opened the way for a major Chinese shipping group to buy a large stake [in the strategic port of Hamburg](#).

It would be foolhardy to confuse the clear and assertive policy choices of a rising imperialist power with some kind of ‘anti-colonial’ consciousness of ‘a fifth of the world’s population’.

## Iran

The mullah regime in Iran has, like China, consistently abstained on UN resolutions condemning Russia, while at the same time holding back from support for the invasion, which goes against Iran’s dogma of allegedly being against invasions (after its experience of being invaded by Iraq), especially when involving “great powers”, due to its own experience of being sanctioned by the US. We can leave aside the obvious hypocrisy here – ie, Iran’s massive interventions in Iraq and especially Syria, bolstering Assad’s genocide regime – because that is “explained” as “defending Syria,” whereas a blatant invasion cannot be explained away like that.

Unlike China, however, Iran has become more directly involved on Russia’s side in killing Ukrainian civilians with its supply of killer-drones to Russia.

Can Iran’s position be explained as a reflection of the “anti-imperialist consciousness” of the Iranian masses, due to decades of US bullying? In other words, does the position of the blood-drenched mullocracy “reflect” the views of ordinary Iranian people, such as the youth and women who have been out in the streets for months protesting the reactionary dictatorship, and who the regime has been gunning down and hanging? How likely is such an idea, at least to anyone with an inkling of class analysis?

Not much, it seems. According to a poll of 1014 people in June-July by the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) and IranPoll, since the onset of Russia’s invasion, favourable views of Russia have dropped from a slight majority of 56% to a minority of 40%, while [unfavourable views of Russia have surged from 42% to 57%](#), including 32% who now hold “a very unfavorable view.” This should not be seen as contradicting the fact that the vast majority still hold a highly unfavourable view of the US. While 28% chose an overriding statement that Russia had acted in legitimate self-defence, double that number, a clear majority of 55%, chose a statement that Russia is [violating the principle that no country should invade another](#). Specifically on who was to blame for the war, Russia and the West came out about equally, while very few blamed Ukraine.

Iran’s intervention via killer-drones thus goes against the mass of Iranian opinion, and has even led to high-level criticism, with [thirty-five former Iranian diplomats](#) issuing a call for Iran to declare neutrality, and strongly criticising this intervention. Iran itself claims the drones Russia is using were sent before the war began, and claims it has sent no new drones since – whatever the truth, it indicates how embarrassing Iran’s actual position is.

Far from representing “popular anti-imperialist opinion,” Iran’s pro-Russia intervention is a high-risk strategy adopted by a sub-imperial power. Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia and Argentina, Iran is a BRICS candidate state, and it operates within this framework of sub-imperial rivalry. Iran hopes to swing Russia to its side in its shadow war with Israel in Syria; for years now, Russia, which operates Assad’s anti-aircraft system, has allowed Israel to bomb Iranian and

Hezbollah positions as long as it avoids hitting the Syrian regime. Russia, for its part, in accepting Iranian drones, risks moving Israel to a pro-Ukrainian position.

Yet, to date, neither change has occurred. On the contrary, citing its Ukraine military needs, [Russia withdrew its S-300 anti-aircraft system](#) from Syria in August, seemingly leaving the field even more open to Israeli bombs, while also reportedly [demanding Iranian forces leave western Syria](#) (ie, the side closer to Israel). However, Israeli bombing has markedly declined in recent months, since the signing of its Mediterranean gas demarcation agreement with a Lebanese government which includes Hezbollah. And there are no signs yet of a change in the Israeli position, with Israel abstaining on a UN resolution calling for [Russian reparations to Ukraine](#), and [Ukraine voting in support of anti-Israel and pro-Palestine](#) UN resolutions countless recent times.

Whatever the case with this interesting sub-imperial geopolitical positioning, it is clearly unrelated to the views of the Iranian regimes enemies, ie, its people, those being gunned down in the streets.

## **Palestine**

One country where we might expect the pervasive hypocrisy of western governments to be so overwhelming that a majority may adopt a pro-Russian position simply out of somewhat justified spite would be Palestine. While such a position would not be justified, it would be somewhat understandable and difficult for most of the world to criticise without further engaging in rank hypocrisy. It would be even more understandable given Ukrainian president Zelensky's sickening pro-Israeli statements, which look all the more pathetic given Israel's steadfast refusal to lend Ukraine a hand.

So when we read that in a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion in April, the high figure of 32.3 percent of Palestinians believed Russia had a right to invade, we are perhaps not surprised. However, the problem is that a greater number – 40.2% – believed that [“Russia is waging an unjust war](#) against its neighbour.” The poll of 1014 people was conducted with Palestinians living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip. In other words, although the western governments backing Ukraine with a host of advanced weaponry to resist the illegal and barbaric Russian invasion prefer to condemn every act of justified Palestinian resistance to the illegal and barbaric Israeli occupation and instead arm Israel to the teeth and give diplomatic cover to even its most flagrant violations, still the humanity of Palestine's anti-colonial struggle shines through strongly enough for the largest part of the population to identify with another victim of a similar war of colonial dispossession and extermination. Western leftists need to remember that Palestinians are people, not just their ‘project’; they are just as capable as other people of weighing complex issues.

After all, Putin's white nationalist regime is not exactly any great friend of the Palestinians, with Putin famously declaring [“I support the struggle of Israel”](#) during Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge blitzkrieg against Gaza, which killed over 2,300 Palestinians while some 11,000 were wounded, including 3,374 children, of whom over 1,000 were left permanently disabled. From the time Russia began terror-bombing Syrian civilians to save Assad in 2015, Putin and Israeli prime minister and Likud leader, Zionist extremist Benjamin Netanyahu, never stopped having high level meetings – Netanyahu met with Putin more than with any other world leader. In 2018, [Netanyahu was one of only two world leaders](#) standing next to Putin in Red Square commemorating the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany, alongside Serbia's Alexander Vucic. Netanyahu even produced [a massive billboard](#) showing himself with Putin for the 2019 elections.

## **Ireland**

While Ireland may not be conventionally seen as part of the ‘Global South’, it is after all a former

colony, for hundreds of years, of Britain – indeed the ongoing British control of Ulster can be likened to the Donetsk and Luhansk ‘republics’ carved out of Ukraine by its former colonial master.

Sinn-Fein, Ireland’s largest party, with its history of resistance to British colonialism, has [declared its unequivocal support for Ukraine’s resistance to Russian colonialism](#) at its Ard Fheis (congress) on November 5, 2022, declaring that “The Ard Fheis unequivocally condemns any form of imperialism or colonial aggression; we oppose the denial of national self-determination and all violations of national sovereignty throughout the world, without exception; we affirm that the rule of international law must be emphasized and reinforced, respectful of the exercise of national self-determination, sovereignty and democracy in all nations.” Sinn Fein therefore demands:

- The total cessation of the war in Ukraine;
- The complete restoration of the national sovereignty of Ukraine;
- The immediate withdrawal of all Russian armed forces;
- The maintenance of all political or economic sanctions until these objectives are achieved.

Sinn Fein’s democratic vote would seem to be more representative of the views of a formerly colonised people than abstentions by Modi’s violently chauvinist regime in India, its rival Pakistan, China’s one-party state carrying out forced assimilation against a million people in its internal colony Xinjiang, the bloody Iranian mullahs currently gunning down the women-led uprising, the brutal Wagner-backed dictatorships in Mali and CAR and the like. Also worth noting that “The Ard Fheis’s keynote speaker was Omar Bargouthi, a founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), which Sinn Fein supports,” in other words, Sinn Fein are consistent in their approach.

Sinn Féin also “unequivocally condemn[ed] the [illegal annexation of four regions in Ukraine](#) by Russia,” calling it a “gross violation of international law.”

### **Comment on global surveys**

The above relies on a somewhat eclectic variety of national or supranational surveys and it is difficult to vouch for the degree of validity and reliability without significantly deeper research. However, it is difficult to find any better tentative data, and certainly none at all that suggests any groundswell of support for Russia and its invasion, in the Global South of anywhere else. Despite their significant differences, every survey indicates that majorities around the world condemn the Russian invasion, are sympathetic to Ukraine and have a rather low opinion of Russia; they also all indicate quite strongly that, whatever the situation before 2022, approval of Russia and Putin has crashed everywhere in the world since the invasion.

This is also backed up by global surveys. For example, an Open Society survey carried out in 22 countries in July and August, covering 21,000 people, two thirds of whom live in the Global South, found “strong and widespread support” for the view that peace requires Russia to “[withdraw from all parts of Ukrainian territory it currently controls](#).” Majorities in nearly all countries held this view, the exceptions being Senegal (46 percent), India (44 percent), Indonesia (30 percent), and Serbia (12 percent). Among the countries with the strongest support for this view were Kenya (81%), Nigeria (71%), Brazil (68%), Colombia (67%) – all higher than in the US, Japan, France and Germany – and South Africa (59%). Any difference between populations of the North and South were comprehensively absent.

A partial contrast was provided by an [Ipsos survey of 19,000 people in 27 countries](#) in March and April, but this focused not so much on attitudes but on what action should be taken, with questions related to sanctions, ‘getting involved militarily’, taking some kind of unspecified ‘action’, taking

Ukrainian refugees and so on. In this case, it is not surprising that the higher levels of support for some kind of action were in Europe, and to a lesser extent the US. The Ukraine war is, after all, in Europe; and western countries can obviously better afford both military support, and withstanding the impact of sanctions, than can poorer countries. However, what confuse the 'anti-imperialist' argument in this case was that the countries where the largest numbers were against any kind of 'action' or 'interference' included Hungary, the European state led by the intensely far-right Orban government, Israel, widely considered an extreme outpost of western imperialism, the Saudi monarchy, often considered (somewhat incorrectly) as an unreconstructed US-client regime, and Turkey, a NATO member. Indeed, the assertion that "doing nothing in Ukraine will encourage Russia to take further military action" received the lowest support among the 27 countries [in Israel and Hungary](#), the only countries voting below 50 percent for this view (compared to 71 percent in India, for example). Reality can be rather difficult for campist "thinking."

## **Sub-imperialism**

I wrote above, in relation to the relatively powerful states leading the abstention or otherwise ambivalent party on Russia's horrific imperialist war of conquest against Ukraine:

"Rather, what these countries and governments have in common - China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel - is their sub-imperialist (or in some cases arguably imperialist) nature. Far from their positions on the war reflecting any "anti-colonial" consciousness of their people (or reflecting their oppressed and exploited peoples at all), they rather reflect the geopolitical positioning, their global bargaining position, between US, European, Russian and Chinese imperialism, taking advantage of the war to assert their own sub-imperial interests, regional influence and conquests, and oppressive rule over internal and local colonies."

Patrick Bond, Ana Garcia, Miguel Borba describe "sub-imperial" powers as "featuring the super-exploitation of their working classes, [predatory relations regarding their hinterlands](#), and collaboration (although tensioned) with imperialism, especially as intermediaries in the transfer of both surplus labor values and "free gifts of nature" (unequal ecological exchange) from South to North." Bond cites John Smith that "dependent economies like Brazil seek to compensate for the drain of wealth to the imperialist centres by developing their own exploitative relationships with [even more underdeveloped and peripheral neighbouring economies](#)," and David Harvey who notes that "each developing centre of capital accumulation sought out systematic spatio-temporal fixes for its own surplus capital by defining territorial spheres of influence."

But by attempting to carve out such "territorial spheres of influence," their collaboration with global imperialist powers will also be punctuated by bouts of competition, as their minor exploitative aspirations sometimes come into conflict with the exploitative needs of larger global powers. This "tensioned collaboration" with imperialism was called by leading dependency theorist Ruy Mauro Marini "antagonistic cooperation." According to Harvey, as the opening of the global market "created openings" for new large regional states "to insert themselves into the global economy." But "they then [became competitors on the world stage](#)." Importantly, though, becoming (partial) competitors does not make them in any sense "anti-imperialist," but, on the contrary, these larger centers of economic and military power within the Global South have "[aspirations to follow Western expansionary precedents](#), using instruments of (corporate-oriented) multilateral power."

It is not surprising that a moment of global crisis such as that ushered in by Russia's invasion of Ukraine is precisely a perfect moment for a large string of sub-imperial powers to assert themselves, to position, to use the crisis to improve their bargaining position in relation to US and European imperialism - even those often most often considered "western allies" - and, at the same time, with now decrepit Russian, and also globally ascendant Chinese, imperialism; a moment when all are



under pressure to do some kind of deal to get them onside.

While this is not the final word on the causes of the abstention and/or effective neutrality or even pro-Russian orientation of a large number of powerful ruling classes in the Global South, it is a far better explanation than the one which tries to claim the vast billions of people of the Global South as their “anti-colonial” project, alleging they are a multi-billion mass of group-think. In this alternative scenario, their ruling elites – those responsible for the “super-exploitation” of these working classes, and of the peoples in the “even more underdeveloped and peripheral neighbouring economies,” are merely reflecting this allegedly “anti-colonial” consciousness of those they oppress and exploit, who in turn naturally support this global stance of their oppressors and exploiters. As we have seen, this is not only inherently illogical, and in conflict with even the most basic concept of class analysis, but also at odds with most of the empirical evidence of popular opinion in the South.

---

**Michael Karadjis**

[\*Click here\*](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

---

**P.S.**

Syrian Revolution Commentary and Analysis

<https://mkaradjis.com/2023/01/13/ukraine-war-sub-imperialist-positioning-not-anti-colonial-consciousness-behind-the-neutrality-of-reactionary-elites-in-the-global-south/>