

Ukraine And The World Order

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The war in Ukraine is not just about territory. It's about the future of global governance.

As the Cold War began to wane, multipolarism became a rallying cry for everyone sick and tired of superpower politics, nuclear standoffs, and the banal bipolarism of Soviet misinformation and American propaganda.

This “rise of the rest” was prefigured in the Non-Aligned Movement that began in 1961, the New International Economic Order that the United Nations launched in the 1970s, the consolidation of an economically powerful East Asia and a single European market in the 1980s, and the south-south cooperation that emerged in the 1990s. By the early 2000s, after a couple of papers by Morgan Stanley, of all places, the BRICS bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa was [christened](#) and then institutionalized.

In 2008, Fareed Zakaria published [The Post-American World](#), which was less an epitaph for U.S. hegemony than a paean to all the other rising powers that were increasingly shaping geopolitics. It was hard to refute his central thesis. The bipolar world had vanished; the unipolar world of American supremacy was no longer tenable; the multipolar world was emerging like a kind of phoenix, even though the old world had not yet been reduced to ash and the new bird was still in its infancy.

Then something strange happened.

“Multipolarity” began to take on a very different shape after Russia began its serial interventions in Ukraine in 2014. What had once been a bracing antidote to transatlantic arrogance and the pretensions of the Global North became something else entirely: a cover for attacks on universal values. Instead of new powers getting a seat at the table to help make global rules, authoritarians of various stripes were invoking multipolarism to break up the table for firewood and toss the rules out the window in favor of nationalism and particularism.

Those who want to diminish the current war in Ukraine describe it as a regional conflict over the fate of some Russian speakers caught between two states. By contrast, those who want to elevate the war's importance cast it as a confrontation between “east” and “west.”

In fact, Ukraine is at the center of something even more far-reaching. The war there has become a defining moment in the quest for a new world order.

The New Russian Philosophy

One age-old division in Russian thinking has pitted those who embrace the West (Westernizers) against those who champion more home-grown influences (Slavophiles). An updated version of that stand-off has recast the skeptics of the “West” in the role of those who believe that universal values—otherwise known as “liberal values” or globalized culture—will transform Russia in malign ways.

Thus, Russian President Vladimir Putin's "illiberalism" takes aim at a range of progressive movements: feminism, LGBTQ rights, secularism. Putin and his modern-day Slavophiles want to return to a pre-globalized world of sovereign states that have exclusive jurisdiction over what happens within their borders. What that means in practical terms was on display recently when the Russian government [effectively outlawed](#) transgender people.

"The multipolar world arrangement has become one of the most important aspects of Russia's soft power in the global arena and one important instrument for retaining its international influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union," [wrote](#) Elena Chebankova back in 2017 in *Post-Soviet Affairs*. "Russia deploys the ideas of civilizational particularity in defense of its territorial and political integrity and in attempts to curb the advance of global democratization and the attendant economic interests of third parties."

This multipolarity appeals to illiberal leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, who has his own beefs with the "unipolarity" of the European Union. Other members of Europe's extreme right, who want their own countries to veer away from the European consensus on rights and responsibilities, also gravitate toward Russia's "multipolar" rhetoric.

But Putin's strategic deployment of multipolarism is primarily aimed at the Global South. Here, Russia is piggybacking on the old Soviet legacy of backing anti-colonial struggles and anti-Western movements. The old rhetoric of self-determination has now merged with the new emphasis on sovereignty. Russia doesn't care what another country is doing within its borders as long as it proves to be a useful geopolitical ally, client, or trading partner. The Kremlin further clothes these arguments in "civilizational" language—Russia, China, India, and others are not just great powers but powerful civilizations that stretch back centuries if not millennia—as if to provide historical grandeur to rather small-minded nationalist, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic ambitions.

This emphasis on civilizational spheres of influence works just fine for Xi's China, Modi's India, Assad's Syria, Ramaphosa's South Africa, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Ortega's Nicaragua. It's how the Soviet Union operated, notwithstanding the deviations from Marxist theory. The United States, too, leaned heavily on this doctrine of spheres of influence, particularly in the era of *realpolitik* before human rights complicated the picture.

"Multipolarity has become the keystone of the shared language of global fascisms and authoritarianisms," [argues](#) Marxist feminist activist and writer Kavita Krishnan. "It is a rallying cry for despots, that serves to dress up their war on democracy as a war on imperialism. The deployment of multipolarity to disguise and legitimize despotism is immeasurably enabled by the ringing endorsement by the global Left of multipolarity as a welcome expression of anti-imperialist democratization of international relations."

Meet the new multipolarism: a great place for extremists of the right and left to share and schmooze.

Left Meets Right

I used to scoff at the old liberal chestnut that the political spectrum curved around at the ends in such a way that the extreme left merged into the extreme right. I insisted instead that the ideological world was flat, and those who ran to the extremes fell off their respective edges into their own separate abyss.

Now I'm not so sure.

In the last decade, there's been a disturbing uptick in red-brown alliances, like the Five Star

Movement joining hands with Liga in Italy or the [anti-immigrant Stand Up movement](#) that broke from Germany's Left party.

In the United States, 12 percent of those who supported Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primary [voted for Donald Trump](#) in the general election. That could be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy of America's two-party system and the frustrating lack of alternatives.

But strange pairings have continued to emerge in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year. In February, the Rage Against the War Machine rally in Washington protested U.S. support for Ukraine and featured reactionary libertarian Ron Paul, Green Party stalwart Jill Stein, and the putatively leftist People's Party—an event [enthusiastically promoted](#) by none other than Tucker Carlson. Then there's Max Blumenthal, who runs the putatively leftist Grey Zone blog site, [testifying](#) at the UN Security Council at the invitation of the Russian mission in New York. No surprise that this "journalist" merely parroted Russian propaganda in his speech.

But it's "multipolarism" that is proving to be an even more useful meeting ground for the left and the right. Progressives have long welcomed a redistribution of power at the geopolitical level. But the unfortunate tendency of some leftists to excuse authoritarianism as long as it's anti-U.S. or anti-Western is now being shoehorned into this new multipolarism under cover of a vigorous defense of sovereignty, illiberalism, and anti-globalization.

That strain of Third Worldism can be seen in the work of Vijay Prashad and the [Tricontinental Institute](#), with its amplification of official Russian and Chinese narratives. Or the latest book of nonsense from Fadi Lama, [Why the West Can't Win](#), with its praise of the notion of a "sovereign fair world" put forward by Russia, China, and Iran against the predations of the "Empire."

It's astonishing the intellectual acrobatics to which these critics of imperialism resort in order to explain away Russian imperialism, its obvious violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, and its use of multipolarism as a vehicle for the consolidation of its own power. In earlier eras, some leftists engaged in similar games of ideological Twister to excuse Soviet invasions (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan) or Chinese efforts to digest Tibet. At least China and the Soviet Union were putatively leftist regimes, so these defenses were understandable if abhorrent.

But Russia today, under Vladimir Putin, is the closest thing to fascist that the poor benighted country has suffered over the last century. In its flight from liberalism, the extreme left has indeed joined hands with actors on the other side of the spectrum. These anti-imperialists with blinders may well rationalize their alliances as purely tactical. But there is a much longer history here of dalliances with authoritarians—Stalin, Mao, Mugabe, Castro. Whether it's a fawning tweet in support of Trump's faux isolationism or a strained attempt to excuse Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a reasonable response to NATO expansion, the left has to reckon with its failure to be evenhanded in its anti-imperialism.

The Future of Multipolarism

The war in Ukraine spells [the death of multipolarism](#). So argue those who believe that the war has marginalized Russia, weakened Europe, and further sidelined the Global South while strengthening the United States and China. Both Washington and Beijing have indeed benefited at the expense of their clients, the former supplying gas to Europe and the latter buying discounted energy from Russia. If you squint at the world politics, it does seem as though the United States and China are calling the shots. Bipolarism is dead; long live bipolarism!

An equally strong case can be made that the war has hastened [the inevitability of multipolarism](#). The

U.S. and Chinese ability to determine outcomes beyond their borders has severely eroded. The war in Ukraine grinds on. Europe has found alternatives to Russian energy (thank you, Washington and Doha) and has taken the lead in charting a carbon-free future. The Global South, meanwhile, has refused to endorse either the East or the West in this conflict. Geopolitics has become increasingly unpredictable. The United States might want to return to the good old days of unipolarism, as Stephen Walt [argues](#), but it can't.

So, is multipolarism waxing or waning? Much depends on Ukraine.

If Ukraine fails to eject the Russian invaders, it will set an ominous precedent for international law. A transgressor who goes unpunished serves as a powerful symbol for all current and potential lawbreakers. It's not just illegal cross-border interventions but also human rights violations and even failures to meet carbon emission reduction targets. And Ukraine itself, hobbled economically and with unclear borders, will have that much harder a time joining the European Union and functioning in the international arena.

If Ukraine wins, on the other hand, it will strike a mighty blow for an expanding European space and against the predations of Putinism. Further, if Russia evolves from an authoritarian petro-state into something approaching a democracy with a commitment to clean energy, that will be a powerful example for movements struggling against dirty-energy dictators around the world.

Although China and the United States are the most important geopolitical actors on the world stage right now, this is likely just a transitional moment. India is now the [most populous country in the world](#) and set to become the third largest economy by the end of the decade. The EU is establishing the standard for a new, carbon-light economy. The Global South has much of the resource wealth necessary for a clean energy transition, which it can (potentially) leverage for greater global power.

So, the stakes are high in Ukraine. At risk is not just territorial integrity or about 30,000 square miles of occupied land. The battle is over the trajectory of international governance. It is, ultimately, a choice between global chaos and global community.

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