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ACURA ViewPoint: Krishen Mehta: The Ukraine War viewed from the Global South

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Map Shows Countries That Support Western Govt Sanctions Against Russia vs Those Who Do Not

By Krishen Mehta

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In October 2022, about eight months after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the University of Cambridge in the UK harmonized surveys that asked the inhabitants of 137 countries about their views of the West, Russia, and China. The findings in [the combined study](#) are robust enough to demand our serious attention.

- Of the 6.3 billion people who live outside of the West, 66% feel positively towards Russia, and 70% feel positively towards China.

- 75% of respondents in South Asia, 68% of respondents in Francophone Africa, and 62% of respondents in Southeast Asia report feeling positively toward Russia.
- Public opinion of Russia remains positive in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam.

These findings have caused some surprise and even anger in the West. It's difficult for Western thought leaders to comprehend that two-thirds of the world's population is just not lining up with the West in this conflict. However, I believe there are five reasons why the Global South is not taking the West's side. I discuss these reasons in the short essay below.

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1. The Global South does not believe that the West understands or empathizes with its problems.

India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, summed it up succinctly in a recent interview: "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems." Developing countries face many challenges, from the aftermath of the pandemic, the high cost of debt service, and the climate crisis that is ravaging their environments, to the pain of poverty, food shortages, droughts, and high energy prices. Yet the West has barely given lip service to the seriousness of many of these issues, even while insisting that the Global South join it in sanctioning Russia.

The Covid pandemic is a perfect example. Despite the Global South's repeated pleas to share intellectual property on the vaccines with the goal of saving lives, no Western nation has been willing to do so. Africa remains to this day the most unvaccinated continent in the world. African nations have the manufacturing capability to make the vaccines, but without the necessary intellectual property, they remain dependent on imports.

But help did come from Russia, China, and India. Algeria launched a vaccination program in January 2021 after it received its first batch of Russia's Sputnik V vaccines. Egypt started vaccinations after receiving China's Sinopharm vaccine at about the same time, while South Africa procured a million doses of AstraZeneca from the Serum Institute of India.

In Argentina, Sputnik became the backbone of the national vaccine program. This all happened while the West was using its financial resources to buy millions of doses in advance, then often destroying them when they expired. The message to the Global South was clear — the pandemic in your countries is your problem, not ours.

2. History matters: who stood where during colonialism and after independence?

Many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia view the war in Ukraine through a different lens than the West. They see their former colonial powers regrouped as members of the Western alliance. This alliance — for the most part, members of the European Union and NATO or the closest allies of the US in the Asia-Pacific region — makes up the countries that have sanctioned Russia. By contrast, many countries in Asia, and almost all countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, have tried to remain on good terms with *both* Russia and the West, shunning sanctions against Russia. Could this be because they remember their history at the receiving end of the West's colonial policies, a trauma that they still live with but which the West has mostly forgotten?

Nelson Mandela often said that it was the Soviet Union's support, both moral and material, that helped inspire South Africans to overthrow the Apartheid regime. Because of this, Russia is still viewed in a favorable light by many African countries. And once independence came for these countries, it was the Soviet Union that supported them, despite its own limited resources. Egypt's Aswan Dam, completed in 1971, was designed by the Moscow-based Hydro Project Institute and financed in large part by the Soviet Union. The Bhilai Steel Plant, one of the first large infrastructure projects in newly independent India, was set up by the USSR in 1959.

Other countries also benefited from the political and economic support provided by the former Soviet Union, including Ghana, Mali, Sudan, Angola, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Mozambique. On February 18, 2023, at the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the foreign minister of Uganda, Jeje Odongo, had this to say: "We were colonized and forgave those who colonized us. Now the colonizers are asking us to be enemies of Russia, who never colonized us. Is that fair? Not for us. Their enemies are their enemies. Our friends are our friends."

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Rightly or wrongly, present-day Russia is seen by many countries in the Global South as an ideological successor to the former Soviet Union. Fondly remembering the USSR's help, they now view Russia in a unique and often favorable light. Given the painful history of colonization, can we blame them?

3. The war in Ukraine is seen by the Global South as mainly about the future of Europe rather than the future of the entire world.

The history of the Cold War has taught developing countries that getting embroiled in great power conflicts carries enormous risks but returns scant, if any, rewards. As a consequence, they view the Ukraine proxy war as one that is more about the future of European security than the future of the entire world. From the Global South's perspective, the Ukraine war seems to be an expensive distraction from its own most pressing issues. These include higher fuel prices, rising food prices, higher debt service costs, and more inflation, all of which Western sanctions against Russia have greatly aggravated.

A recent survey published by Nature Energy states that up to 140 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty by the soaring energy prices seen over the past year. High energy prices not only directly impact energy bills — they also lead to upward price pressures along supply chains and ultimately on consumer items, including food and other necessities. This across-the-board inflation inevitably hurts developing countries much more than the West.

The West can sustain the war "as long as it takes." They have the financial resources and the capital markets to do so, and of course they remain deeply invested in the future of European security. But the Global South does not have the same luxury, and a war for the future of security in Europe has the potential to devastate the security of the entire world. The Global South is alarmed that the West is not pursuing negotiations that could bring this war to an early end, beginning with the missed opportunity in December 2021, when

Russia proposed revised security treaties for Europe that could have prevented the war but which were rejected by the West.

The peace negotiations of April 2022 in Istanbul were also rejected by the West in part to “weaken” Russia. Now, the entire world — but especially the developing world — is paying the price for an invasion that the Western media like to call “unprovoked” but which likely could have been avoided, and which the Global South has always seen as a local rather than an international conflict.

4. The world economy is no longer dominated by America or led by the West. The Global South now has other options.

Several countries in the Global South increasingly see their futures as tied to countries that are no longer in the Western sphere of influence. Whether this view reflects an accurate perception of the shifting balance of power or wishful thinking is partially an empirical question, so let’s look at some metrics.

The US share of global output declined from 21 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2021, while China’s share rose from 4% to 19% during the same period. China is the largest trading partner for most of the world, and its GDP in purchasing power parity already exceeds that of the US. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa) had a combined GDP in 2021 of \$42 trillion, compared with \$41 trillion in the US-led G7. Their population of 3.2 billion is more than 4.5 times the combined population of the G7 countries, which stands at 700 million.

The BRICS are not imposing sanctions on Russia nor supplying arms to the opposing side. Russia is one of the biggest suppliers of energy and foodgrains for the Global South, while China’s Belt and Road Initiative remains a major supplier of financing and infrastructure projects. When it comes to financing, food, energy, and infrastructure, the Global South must rely more on China and Russia more than on the West.

The Global South also sees the Shanghai Cooperation Organization expanding, more countries wanting to join the BRICS, and some countries now trading in currencies that move them away from the dollar, the Euro, or the West. Meanwhile, some countries in Europe are risking deindustrialization thanks to higher energy costs. This reveals an economic vulnerability in the West that was not so evident before the war. With developing countries having an obligation to put the interests of their own citizens first, is it any wonder that they see their future more and more tied to countries outside the West?

5. The “rules-based international order” is losing credibility and in decline.

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The vaunted “rules-based international order” is the bulwark of post–World War II liberalism, but many countries in the Global South see it as having been conceived by the West and imposed unilaterally on other countries. Few if any non-Western countries ever signed on to this order. The South is not opposed to a rules-based order, but rather to the present content of these rules as conceived by the West.

But one must also ask, does the rules-based international order apply even to the West?

For decades now, many in the Global South have seen the West as having its way with the world without much concern for playing by the rules. Several countries were invaded at will, mostly without United Nations Security Council authorization. These include the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Under what “rules” were those countries attacked or devastated, and were those wars provoked or unprovoked? Julian Assange is languishing in prison and Ed Snowden remains in exile, both for having the courage (or perhaps the audacity) to expose the truths behind these and similar actions.

Even today, sanctions imposed on over 40 countries by the West impose considerable hardship and suffering. Under what international law or “rules-based order” did the West use its economic strength to impose these sanctions? Why are the assets of Afghanistan still frozen in Western banks while the country is facing starvation and famine? Why is Venezuelan gold still held hostage in the UK while the people of Venezuela are living at subsistence levels? And if Sy Hersh’s expose is true, under what ‘rules-based order’ did the West destroy the Nord Stream pipelines?

A paradigm shift appears to be taking place. We’re moving from a Western-dominated to a more multipolar world. The war in Ukraine has made more evident the international divergences that are driving this shift. Partly because of its own history, and partly because of emerging economic realities, the Global South sees a multipolar world as a preferable outcome, one in which its voice is more likely to be heard.

President Kennedy ended his American University speech in 1963 with the following words: “We must do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just. We are not helpless before that task or hopeless for its success. Confident and unafraid, we must labor on towards a strategy of peace.” That strategy of peace was the challenge before us in 1963, and it remains a challenge for us today. The voices for peace, including those of the Global South, need to be heard.

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