



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2022


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

A World on the Fence. The International Community and the War in Ukraine

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The war in Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022 has transformed into a war of attrition in which the tide seems to have shifted in Ukraine's favour. Nonetheless, Ukraine, Russia, the West, and the rest of the world have accepted that the conflict would be a long one. Meanwhile, while exchanges of artillery fire rage on the ground, the conflict has also become an information battle. Kyiv, the West, and Moscow offer competing narratives to explain the conflict's implications, tying them to their different visions of the world order.

This battle of discourses has become as crucial as the one on the ground. Because the invasion is going more poorly than Vladimir Putin had promised Russians, the Kremlin looks for other ways to mobilise the population for a long conflict and has it accept the economic downturn in Russia. The claim that it is necessary to fight supposed "Ukrainian Nazis" is not enough. The Kremlin doubles down on its narrative that the war in Ukraine is really an opposition between Russia and NATO. The conflict is against the West's subjugation of Russian civilisational values, Moscow claims. It is a "clash of civilisations", an expression regularly used by Russian nationalists such as the recently assassinated Daria Dugina, that will continue.ⁱ

Conversely, to prevent Western support from vacillating, Ukraine needs more than ever for the West and its many constituencies to believe that it is the victim of an unprovoked aggression from Russia and that, importantly, there is a tangible Russian threat for Western Europe and, potentially, the rest of the world. By helping Ukraine, the West is helping itself, Kyiv argues. The economic fallout in the EU of the sanctions on Russia are the "price of our freedom", the French President Emmanuel Macron has recently explained.ⁱⁱ The West should therefore not compromise with Moscow over Ukraine.

While presenting competing narratives at home, Moscow, on one side, and Kyiv and the West, on the other, also appeal to the rest of the international community for political, moral, and economic support. This essay explores these narratives, showing how Russia, and the West and Kyiv have both struggled to have the rest of the world adhere to their point of view.

So far, many in the international community have remained on the fence about the war in Ukraine. While leaning toward the West, countries in Asia, South America, and Africa are not ready to jeopardise their relations with Russia. Conversely, despite



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its claim to the contrary, Russia has received little to no concrete support in its war. Moscow is isolated while various autocratic powers appear eager to take advantage of its weakening to advance their interests.

Russia's Failed Anti-Western Coalition

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Russia has argued that it was also about ending the US-dominated world order that is oppressive, corrupt, and immoral. Moscow claims that it leads a contestation of that order by regional powers. The latter is in fact a longstanding argument of Russian foreign policy. While the "Nazi argument" has dominated domestically, the "clash of civilisations" one is meant to build on global anti-Americanism to elicit support for Russia.ⁱⁱⁱ So far, Russia's attempts at advancing its narrative to gain allies have been more miss than hit, no less because its premise is contradictory.

As stressed by Alexander Baunov, a former Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official and Carnegie Centre's Fellow, either the West is decadent and crumbling by itself, and then it is unclear why Russia needs to fight it, or it is challenging Russia in Ukraine and Moscow must oppose it. Russia cannot have it both ways.^{iv} Ultimately, this contradiction highlights, as in a reverse mirror, that even before the war, it was not the West's, but Russia's economy that was struggling. Unlike China, which has gained from globalisation and does well in the current world order, Moscow has never managed to curb its reliance on the exports of natural resources and recover the economic growth that had characterised its economy in the 2000s.

By embedding the war in Ukraine in anti-Americanism and denouncing the West's complex of superiority, Moscow has garnered sympathy for its policy in parts of the world. Indeed, after years of some Western pundits and officials arguing, openly or between the lines, that Europe had moved past conflict because it is more civilised than the rest, the war in Ukraine appears no different from wars in Africa or the Middle East. The rest of the world sees it that way. It is a local problem that affects other countries indirectly, through rising grain and natural resources prices and their reduced availability. Saudi Arabia, Brazil, India and other countries do not see it as a threat to global security. In fact, many countries may perceive the West's call to form an anti-Russian coalition as another manifestation of its ethnocentrism that treats problems in Europe as unique and more important than in other regions.

The Russian strategy to build on anti-Americanism has, however, reached a limit. While it has helped Moscow avoid condemnation and sanctions from outside the West, it has not helped in securing tangible support, including from its supposed allies. One reason is that it is unclear what world order Russia is proposing and how exactly it could benefit other countries, many of which are well-embedded in the current global system. Could Russia offer them more than an opportunity to engage in *schadenfreude* at the West's expense after centuries of its (neo)colonial policies? Does it have an alternative economic organisation or ideology for the world? The answer to these questions is no and this is a significant difference compared to the Communist block during the Cold War.



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If Russia is leading a global contestation of the West, then where are its allies? The Russian media like to refer to Russian invading forces as “allied forces” to link the war in Ukraine with the Second World War, but such comments only stress how Russia has no allies in Ukraine beyond the few troops of the Luhansk and Donetsk republics.^v In fact, it ironically reminds observers that, during the war, it is the West’s military coalition that has expanded with Finland and Sweden applying to join NATO, as well as the Ukrainian forces receiving a considerable influx of volunteers. By contrast, a limited number of mercenaries from the post-Soviet space and Syria have joined Russian forces in Ukraine, and certainly no volunteers have come from South America or Africa. The latter is a major issue, as the lack of personnel is the main factor that has stalled the Russian advance and allowed the Ukrainian counteroffensive in August 2022.

Markedly, even economic and political support to Russia remains limited, including from its supposed allies. Two examples illustrate that point. First, the post-Soviet countries, including those part of Russia’s military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), have only reluctantly backed Moscow. In this context, Russia has not called on the CSTO, as it could have, to deploy troops to Ukraine. It has also silently accepted that the post-Soviet countries did not provide it with political support at the UN. Only Belarus has voted against the resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.^{vi} There are several causes for the post-Soviet countries’ discomfort with Russia.

Kazakhstan, Belarus, Georgia, and (pro-Western) Moldova have lands Russian nationalists claim as part of Russia. Observing the situation in Ukraine, their leaders wonder if they could be invaded next. An example of that defiance occurred at the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022. There, the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev clarified that his country would not recognise any “quasi-state”, including Luhansk and Donetsk.^{vii} The comment was striking because it was done in person, in Russia, at a forum that Putin had personally attended, and by the president of a country that had just in January 2022 relied on CSTO forces to fend off a domestic revolt. Still, Tokayev, the head of one of the largest and wealthiest post-Soviet countries, wanted to show that he had reservations about Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Beyond this, as countries in the rest of the world, post-Soviet countries fear being caught in the economic war between Russia and the West. Those part of the Eurasian Economic Union, especially, want to avoid Western sanctions. Instead, far from showing unyielding loyalty to Russia, some of them are looking to advancing their own interests. Azerbaijan is thinking about once more challenging Russia-backed Armenia for Nagorno-Karabakh and has already agreed to boost its gas exports to the EU. Kazakhstan is modernising its ports on the Caspian Sea to be able to export oil to the EU while bypassing Russia.

Second, China has similarly shown ambiguity in its support to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Russia and China have agreed on a “strategic partnership” in February 2022, but the latter is not a military alliance as in the early days of the PRC. It remains anchored in shared insecurities toward the West and an economic complementarity that leaves Russia the role of commodities supplier for the Chinese market.^{viii} Amidst tensions with the West over Taiwan and bilateral trade, China has done little to support Russia in Ukraine beyond official statements in the media. It has not provided Russia with massive military equipment and weapons. There are also no Chinese volunteers fighting with Russia in Ukraine. Beyond this, while



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Chinese companies have appeared ready to replace some of the departing Western brands and sell Russia the much-needed components to keep its military and economy going, they have done so to make a profit. Meanwhile, some of China's major companies, including *Huawei*, have quietly limited their presence in Russia to avoid falling under Western sanctions. Others are afraid of being accused of helping Russia circumvent these sanctions, including by helping Russian airlines find spare parts for their *Boeing* and *Airbus* planes.

Chinese support is so far mainly political and determined by Beijing's interests. China is likewise ready to buy more of Russia's oil and gas, but it cannot replace the entire EU market in the short term. It is also likely to aggressively negotiate with Russia over prices, as it has done in the past. In the long term, the over-dependence on the Chinese market will certainly be an issue for Russia.

Ultimately, unlike Russia, China has more to lose from a collapse of the current world order in which it is doing well. Beijing believes that it can eventually overtake the West economically after catching up to the latest of Western technology. Against this backdrop, it has arguably little incentive to militarily challenge the West or wreck the current system. In fact, Russia's struggles in Ukraine and the West's resolute response may have led China to question the pertinence of a military approach to settling disputes, including regarding Taiwan.

There are other examples of regional powers whose anti-Americanism has not translated into an alliance with Russia. Iran, for example, has reinforced co-operation with Russia, including in the military sector, in 2022, but the two countries continue to have a complicated relation in Syria and disagreements over the Iranian nuclear deal.

The West's Elusive Anti-Russian Coalition

Countering Russia's narrative, the West has attempted to make the war in Ukraine a dividing line between good and evil. The latter approach recalled for many countries the one adopted by President George W. Bush following the 9/11 attacks. This time, however, many countries proved reluctant to enlist in the Western coalition because they do not consider the war in Ukraine as their problem. The vote on the UN resolution condemning Russia proved representative. Thirty-five countries, including Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Mali, Pakistan, Senegal, and South Africa abstained during the vote. Twelve more did not participate.^{ix} As noted above, this has though seldom translated into meaningful support for Russia.

Still, the West's hope for the universal condemnation and isolation of Russia has failed to materialise. The two most populous countries – China and India – have markedly maintained good relations with Moscow. While China's attitude was to be expected, India's continued military and growing economic co-operation with Moscow has highlighted how the West does not speak for the entire international community. Despite their reliance on development and humanitarian aid from and/or trade



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with the West, many African, Asian, and South American countries chose to distance themselves from the anti-Russian coalition. The anti-Americanism mentioned above has played a role in some cases, but, more crucially, these countries fear that siding with one of the parties would negatively impact on them domestically and jeopardise their own regional ambitions. India, for instance, relies on Russia for military equipment and fears Chinese and Pakistani encroachments along its borders. Openly opposing Beijing and Moscow would be an issue for New Delhi.

The West's revival of the Cold War idea of a "Free World" has furthermore complicated matters.^x The "Free World" idea cannot be used in our time in its original sense of a separation between Communism and anti-Communism. Nevertheless, the attempt to transform it into a dividing line between democracy and autocracy is highly problematic. In that sense, the West's "Free World" ends up somehow including Pakistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – all close allies of the US.

Beyond this, because Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not an ideological challenge, despite what Russia's "Dugins" argue, it is problematic for the West to present it as different from conflicts in Yemen or Syria, or to argue that the abuses committed by Russian forces against Ukrainians are on an entirely different scale from the repressions in East Turkestan (Xinjiang), Palestine, and other places. In fact, aside from the fact that the war in Ukraine has a potential for global escalation due to the involvement of a nuclear power and a proxy war with the West, it resembles many others. In this context, far from mobilising the support of countries in Africa, Asia, and South America, the West struggles to have its own allies commit to sanctioning Russia. Much of the international community does not seem to be ready to see the war in Ukraine as the defining moment of our time, while at the same time morally condemning Russia.

Two examples illustrate the West's difficulties in balancing between the longing for the "Free World" and the need to oppose Russia. First, Turkey, a NATO member and a bastion of anti-Communism during the Cold War, has become increasingly autocratic under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In recent years, it has adopted a more balanced policy between the West and Russia, leveraging its strategic position to advance its regional interests. While its military has tremendously benefitted from the US alliance, Ankara has started military co-operation with Russia. In 2020, it has acquired the Russian S-400 missile-defence system, contravening to NATO rules and leading to US sanctions on some Turkish state companies. Beyond this, Turkey has co-operated with Russia and Iran to advance its interests in Syria, disregarding US recommendations.

Since February 2022, Turkey has distanced itself from the West's anti-Russian coalition. While supporting Ukraine, including through the provision of drones to the Ukrainian military and a visit by Erdogan to Kyiv in August, it has also maintained contacts with Russia. In fact, Turkey has not sanctioned Moscow and has instead profited from the West's ostracism of Russia. Flying through Turkey is now the main way to get to Russia from the EU; Turkey is meanwhile still an attractive destination for Russian tourists. Turkey and Russia have moreover reinforced their economic co-operation as Ankara doubled its oil imports and Turkish companies prepared to fill the gaps left by the departure of Western ones from Russia.^{xi} The latter even led to US warnings that Turkish companies may be penalised if they helped Russia evade the Western sanctions. Likewise, Turkey has not stopped military co-operation with Russia on the S-400 missile-defence system.



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In exchange of its accommodating policy, Turkey has secured Moscow's tacit approval for a potential new military operation in North Syria. The balancing act has also allowed Erdogan to gain considerable political capital as a negotiator on Ukraine, including in securing the recent deal on Ukrainian grain exports. Benefitting from its strategic position, Turkey has leveraged its acceptance of Sweden and Finland's bid to join NATO into concessions from these countries on the Kurdish issue and arms sales, and gratitude from the US. *In fine*, far from seeing it as a global security threat, Ankara appears to see the war in Ukraine as a chance to advance its interests.

Second, the US have struggled with getting Saudi Arabia's support against Russia because Riyadh considers the war in Ukraine a local problem and because it mistrusts the US. Wrestling with its "Free World" idea, President Joe Biden has initially tried to ostracise the *de facto* Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman for his country's dismal record on human rights. Yet, as the war in Ukraine began, Saudi Arabia's central role in the global oil market only increased, forcing the White House to reassess its strategy. After months of rumours that bin Salman was refusing to take Biden's phone calls, the US President finally came to the Middle East to mend relations with the Saudis in July 2022. The latter trip came weeks after the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov had visited the region. One of US goals was to get the Saudi's help in alleviating the global energy crisis that was unfolding following the sanctions on Russia. Yet, on this aspect, Biden's trip had limited results. Riyadh has so far refused to significantly increase oil production and continued to closely coordinate with Moscow.^{xii} Dropping Russia out of the OPEC+ group seemed to be out of the question.

The US strategy to isolate Russia proved here again underwhelming. Unlike during the Cold War when the Saudis were staunch anti-Communists, funding the Arab fighters who flocked to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, they are now on the fence about opposing Russia in Ukraine. It does not mean that the Saudis have become pro-Russian, but it does highlight how the building of the anti-Russian coalition has hit considerable hurdles, including in countries that have close political and military ties with the US. It also proves that few countries regard the war in Ukraine as an existential challenge for their security.

There are other cases of US allies failing to fully back the West on Ukraine. Israel, for instance, has been discreet in its condemnation of Russia, fearing that a confrontation with Moscow would lead it to problems in Syria and with Iran. Jerusalem's inaction appears especially striking given how Russia has instrumentalised the "Ukrainian Nazis" argument to justify the war and accused Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's Jewish President, of being a Nazi.^{xiii}

Conclusion

In the war between Russia and Ukraine, the world is leaning toward Kyiv. Almost no country has justified Russia's unprovoked aggression. Yet, the West's attempt to present the conflict as the defining moment of our time and a global cause have so far failed. The anti-Russian sanctions did not get traction outside the West. In addition to the accumulated frustration with the



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West's ethnocentrism and perceived "double standards", this situation may be the sign of a weakening of the West's global soft power and appeal. Amidst the political and economic issues in the US and EU, some countries feel that they can resist the West's pressure to pick a side. Some local autocratic elites believe that they can use the war in Ukraine to advance their own interests. Unlike during the Cold War, most of the international community does not see Russia as a global security threat or ideological challenge. This lukewarm support, including from several essential allies, is a lesson that the West should also consider in its growing opposition with China.

The West's failure to achieve the global condemnation and isolation of Russia however does not change the fact that Moscow is fighting in Ukraine on its own. Unlike during the Cold War, it has no allies. No country is willing to support it militarily or economically; no leftist guerrilla is ready to open a front in another country to distract the West's resources. In fact, no one is even ready to vote with Russia at the UN. Managing to prevent a unanimous sanction regime is a small achievement for Moscow given that the West largely controls the global economic, cultural, and sport orders from which Russia has now been excluded. Ultimately, Moscow's problem is that it has been unable to make its war in Ukraine into anything more than a revanchist challenge in which it wants to retake what it has lost after the USSR's breakup. It is not proposing an alternative ideology or international system. For this reason, support for Russia is unlikely to grow, even if many countries remain on the fence regarding the war in Ukraine.

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