

The Global South's Views on Ukraine Are More Complex Than You May Think

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The claim that developing countries are neutral about the war or even pro-Russian oversimplifies and distorts a more nuanced reality

On July 19, South Africa announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not be attending the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in late August, ending speculation about whether South Africa would arrest him because of the warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will attend instead.

The ICC warrant accuses Putin of illegally deporting thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia. Russia, like the United States, is not a signatory to the ICC, whereas South Africa is, meaning it would have faced a huge dilemma. As South African President Thabo Mbeki put it, “we cannot” invite Putin to the summit and then arrest him, “but neither can we say ‘come to South Africa’ and not arrest him — because we’re defying our own law.”

BRICS is the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which first met as BRIC in 2009, adding South Africa in 2010. It is a loose coalition of relatively large and economically powerful countries undergoing rapid growth, emerging from the Global South into a position in which they aim to challenge the unrivaled domination of the world economy by the more powerful countries of the Global North. Of these countries, only Brazil and South Africa are signatories to the ICC, whereas Russia, China and India are not, meaning the possibility of Putin being arrested could have caused severe friction within the group — not to mention the dangerous global consequences that could ensue from arresting the head of a nuclear-armed superpower.

This spotlight on South Africa and BRICS raises the vexing question of “neutrality” as to the Russia-Ukraine war. While China, India and South Africa have abstained on U.N. votes to condemn Russia’s invasion, Brazil has formally voted to condemn it. But this vote was attacked by Brazil’s far-right then-President Jair Bolsonaro, who declared “solidarity” with Putin. Such “nonalignment” fits with the stance of ruling elites within the BRICS countries as they position themselves as challengers to the power of the Western states that have led the international defense of Ukraine.

Many commentators have attempted to explain this stance of the BRICS states — and the ambivalent stance of some other relatively powerful states — as representing the views of the entire Global South, the developing world of former colonies. Presuming to speak on behalf of several billion people on three continents, this rendition claims that support for Ukraine is a project solely of the imperial West, and even that “the majority of the world” abstained, because China and India make up two-fifths of the world’s population.

Africa further entered the spotlight in June, when a delegation from South Africa, the Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia visited Ukraine and Russia to press both for a ceasefire — which would leave Russian forces in control of one-fifth of Ukraine. Both countries rejected the

call — Putin demonstrated his contempt for the pro-Russian “neutrality” of the African states by launching a missile at Kyiv when the delegation arrived — thus highlighting a crisis of irrelevance for countries that led their own fights for independence from colonialism and now refuse to stand with Ukraine as it does the same thing.

To highlight this point: From the mid-17th century, Ukraine was subjugated by the Russian czar’s emerging empire, at a time when Britain, France and other colonial powers were similarly building theirs. In 1863, the publication of most books in Ukrainian, including educational texts, was banned. In 1876, the printing of almost all Ukrainian literature, the production of Ukrainian stage performances, schooling in Ukrainian and the use of Ukrainian in public life generally were outlawed. Despite a brief flowering of Ukrainian culture and the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet republic after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the suppression of Ukrainian culture soon returned under Stalinist rule. Ukrainians overwhelmingly voted for independence in 1991. Putin aims to revive the Russian Empire and openly declares that Ukraine has no right to exist separately from Russia. This is, therefore, a classic anti-colonial struggle.

Western hypocrisy is often cited as an explanation for the refusal of some of the governments in the Global South to stand with Ukraine’s anti-colonial resistance. This is a valid point. For example, the Western powers supporting Ukraine’s resistance have a different view regarding Israel’s decadeslong brutal and illegal occupation of Palestine as well as the attendant violations of human rights. Not even Putin’s own horrifically brutal actions in Chechnya or Syria evoked the kind of Western reaction we see now in Ukraine. Those are Muslim countries, after all, and Moscow framed these wars as part of the global “war on terror.”

Moreover, there are African conflicts killing huge numbers of people, such as the recent two-year [assault](#) on Tigray conducted by Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is therefore understandable that many Africans would have been offended when French Minister of State Chryssoula Zacharopoulou demanded “solidarity from Africa” against Russia’s “existential threat” to Europe.

Western powers, like Russia, act on the basis of their own interests, which occasionally may coincide with the interests of justice. It is not the fault of Ukrainian civilians getting bombed in apartment blocks that the West is more supportive of them than of other just struggles.

A related contention is that the ambivalence toward the Russia-Ukraine war from some governments in the Global South reflects the anti-colonial memories of their populations. The Western governments now supporting Ukraine’s resistance to Russian imperialism were previously the colonial powers ruling the peoples of the Global South, while the USSR often supported anti-colonial struggles. This especially resonates in South Africa, whose apartheid policies the U.S. and U.K. were the world’s last major countries to break with, whereas the USSR long supported the anti-apartheid struggle.

There are multiple — and obvious — problems with this. Russia is not the USSR. In fact, many African National Congress (ANC) leaders were trained in Ukraine when it was part of the Soviet Union. Russia has a long history as a colonizing power and is engaged today in a 19th-century-style colonial reconquest of its former Ukrainian colony. So “anti-colonial” consciousness could well lead to sympathy for Ukrainians. And the numbers don’t add up: 140 countries voted to condemn the Russian invasion, the vast majority of them in the Global South, while only five voted against.

Furthermore, the argument that Western hypocrisy is the reason for the ambivalent stance of some governments in the South is problematic. Many of these governments are violently oppressive and care neither about Western hypocrisy nor alleged “principles.” In fact, some of the very beneficiaries of this Western hypocrisy — Modi’s India, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia — are among those that

either abstained, rejected sanctions or carried out actions that otherwise benefited Russia.

But there is a more fundamental problem here: the conflation of ruling elites and governments with their peoples — that is, the assumption that people being exploited, oppressed or even gunned down have the same opinions as their oppressors, indeed that their oppressors' votes and policies reflect their views at all.

There are several challenges involved with determining the opinions of ordinary people rather than their governments. First, it is likely that the hundreds of millions of extremely poor people throughout the Global South are more concerned with daily survival than having any view on a European war. While this means they may have little specific sympathy for Ukraine, they are unlikely for the same reason to be supporters of their governments' pro-Russian stance, either.

Secondly, "public opinion" tends to be manufactured by the elites in control of major media, so a degree of "support" for government positions may reflect this fact, rather than the policies of ruling elites reflecting anti-colonial memories of the masses.

Thirdly, however, the majority of surveys of popular opinion in the Global South do not appear to bear out this narrative in any case. Rather, they tend to show strong support for Ukraine.

While one cannot vouch for the absolute validity of surveys of mere thousands in countries of millions, they are what we have, and their largely similar results suggest a disconnect between the positions of a number of Global South elites and significant sections of their populations. Tentative evidence from these surveys, despite these caveats, suggests that we need better explanations for the neutralist positions of many Global South elites than the assumption that they reflect their "anti-imperialist" populaces.

What stands out about the major states that either abstained on condemning Russia or formally voted to condemn, but were in other respects pro-Russian in practice, is their "subimperial" nature. The South African researcher Patrick Bond, the Brazilian researcher Ana Garcia and the Portuguese researcher Miguel Borba describe "subimperial" powers as "featuring the super-exploitation of their working classes, predatory relations regarding their hinterlands, and collaboration (although tensioned) with imperialism." By attempting to carve out their own regional spheres of influence, their collaboration with global imperialist powers is also punctuated by bouts of competition, which the late Brazilian economist and sociologist Ruy Mauro Marini called "antagonistic cooperation." Becoming partial competitors with global imperialist powers does not make these states "anti-imperialist"; on the contrary, as Bond, Garcia and Borba argue, they aspire "to follow Western expansionary precedents, using instruments of (corporate-oriented) multilateral power."

Their views, votes and actions are thus a reflection of the interests of the elites of these medium-scale powers, rather than any reflection of popular anti-colonial consciousness. Their "multilateralism" reflects their geopolitical positioning — their global bargaining — among American, European, Russian and Chinese imperialisms, taking advantage of the current global conflict over Ukraine to assert their own subimperial interests, oppressive rule over internal colonies and regional influence and conquests.

While 140 members of the U.N. General Assembly voted both to condemn the Russian invasion in March 2022 and later to condemn Russia's annexation of a fifth of Ukraine, five opposed both resolutions and 35 abstained on both. Therefore, even at a government level, the overwhelming majority of nations of the Global South voted to condemn.

Yes, one-third of African countries abstained, but 60% voted to condemn. And while 43 African heads

of state had attended the last Russia-Africa summit in 2019, only 17 attended the summit just held in July — and they essentially told Putin to end the war and warned of the dire consequences for African food security of Russia's abandonment of the deal that allowed Ukraine to export its grain.

Like most myths, these assertions are based on bits and pieces of half-truths. Since most of the 30 or so nations of the Global North voted to condemn Russia's invasion, all abstentions were from the Global South, even if they were vastly outnumbered by condemnations from Global South countries. Of the five that voted against the condemnation, Russia and Belarus are "white" Global North countries, while three are from the Global South: Bashar al-Assad's murderous dictatorship in Syria; North Korea's deranged police state; the highly repressive Eritrean dictatorship (the first time); and Daniel Ortega's authoritarian regime in Nicaragua (the second time). In the February 2023 vote to again condemn the invasion on its anniversary, they were joined by the Wagner Group-backed Malian dictatorship.

But countries vote for different reasons. While some larger states abstained because of sympathy with Moscow or a desire to project their subimperial power globally, many poor countries abstained for economic reasons, fearing that a vote to condemn might affect important economic links with Russia. Others, such as Syria, Mali and the Central African Republic, are more like Russian subsidiaries or quasi-colonies under forms of semi-militarized occupation.

The other kernel of truth is that only Western countries have sent arms to Ukraine and activated economic sanctions on Russia. But this is hardly surprising: The world's major arms suppliers are richer countries, and only they can afford the pain of sanctions on a large country such as Russia. For poorer countries, imposing sanctions could mean significant pain, given Russia's importance in global food, fertilizer and energy markets. And the Ukraine war is in Europe, so it is logical that European nations have more of a direct stake, just as African nations all opposed apartheid and Arab states give official support to Palestine.

With the exception of Turkey, no U.S. allies in the Middle East have supplied arms to Ukraine or imposed sanctions on Russia. After the West imposed oil sanctions on Russia, the U.S. pushed Gulf states to increase their oil supply to reduce global prices. In July, the Saudis responded by leading OPEC into cutting oil production by 2 million barrels a day, to their own, and Russia's, benefit. The final snub to the U.S. was Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's lavish December welcome to China's Xi Jinping; the two signed a "strategic partnership." The Sisi dictatorship in Egypt began construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant by Russia in July 2022.

Israel's far-right then-prime minister, Naftali Bennett, was the first world leader to visit Putin after the invasion. Following U.S. pressure, the centrist Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid issued an official condemnation, but Bennett demanded that his ministers say nothing, blocked other countries from sending Israeli-made arms to Ukraine and prevented provision of Israeli "Iron Dome" missile-shield technology to Ukraine. When then-opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who had long cultivated close ties with Putin, was reelected in December 2022, his new government's first statement promised to "speak less" about Ukraine.

These are not poor countries lacking bargaining power, but Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are not usually considered an anti-imperialist vanguard. When we add other countries with far-right rulers — Putin's ally Viktor Orban in Hungary, Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil, allied with both the U.S. and Russia — the problems with the "anti-imperialist" explanation for softness on Russia are even more apparent.

What is the evidence of any correspondence between the policies of these powerful Global South governments and the "anti-colonial" views of their people, which are allegedly expressed via

supporting Russia's (colonial) invasion of Ukraine?

South Africa is a revealing case. In fact, given South Africa's participation in naval drills with Russia and China in February, "all pretense of neutrality has been shed," said the South African journalist Redi Thlabi on a [recent episode](#) of the *New Lines* podcast The Lede.

In explaining South Africa's U.N. votes, most reports point to the "traditional ties" between the ANC, which led the fight against apartheid, and the Soviet Union, which supported their struggle. Perhaps the government's vote reflects a popular love for Moscow because of this history? According to Thlabi, even if South Africa were truly neutral, this cannot be justified by anti-apartheid history because, like apartheid, one country invading another is a question of principle, and back then South Africa "needed other nations to support our fight against apartheid" rather than hide behind "neutrality."

Moreover, according to a Gallup survey of Africans in 24 countries conducted in 2021 (before the invasion), only 30% of South Africans had a positive view of Russia, the second-lowest rate on the continent. Indeed, the countries where people recorded relatively low support for Russia's leadership (30%-41%) were mostly in the southern African region — Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique — abstaining countries ruled by governments associated with Soviet-backed anti-colonial struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, connected to the anti-apartheid movement. Hence, in the countries where we would expect to see the highest support for Russia based on this "anti-colonial" narrative, we actually see the lowest.

Bear in mind that these were 2021 figures; drastic drops in support for Russia have been recorded everywhere in the world since February 2022. Also worth noting is that, while approval of the Russian government was on average higher in Africa (42%) than globally (33%), this was nevertheless lower than approval ratings for the U.S. (60%), China (52%) and Germany (49%). Also notable is that the 42% average approval for Russia in 2021 was down from 57% in 2011, in the decade when Russia's global imperialist adventures became more pronounced. The 2022 invasion will not have helped.

Note also that, despite the higher African average, 30% approval in South Africa was below the 33% global average.

Thus, far from representing popular pro-Moscow sentiment, it would seem safer to suggest that the ANC government's vote represents the global positioning of the subimperialist BRICS ruling elite. The working classes and the poor throughout the southern African cone, where governing parties are close to Russia, are brutally exploited by the ruling elites that arose out of the ANC: the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front, FRELIMO (Mozambique's ruling party), SWAPO (Namibia's governing party) and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. In fact, South Africa is the most unequal country on Earth, based on 2023 Gini Index rankings, while Namibia, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe are all among the top 15 most unequal (BRICS partner Brazil is ninth).

It is therefore hardly surprising that many people in these countries share precious little in terms of outlook with the subimperialist South African or neighboring neocolonial regimes tied to Russian, Chinese or Western imperialism.

Even if one doubts the survey results, why the marked difference with the higher approval rating — between 50% and 70% — for the Russian leadership in West Africa? Russia allegedly gained support there by moving in recent years to oust France from its dominant role, especially in the "War on Terror." Did the abstention of several West African countries — Mali, the Central African Republic,

Guinea and Togo — represent a surge of support for Russia? And, even if so, does this reflect anti-colonialism?

The problem with one imperialist country replacing another is that the initial welcome can turn sour once the new power asserts itself. This being a 2021 survey, one must take into account the global crash in pro-Russia sympathy following the invasion of Ukraine and, in the cases of Mali and the Central African Republic, also how the Russian-backed rulers revealed their brutal fangs in 2022.

In November 2022, the “All Eyes on Wagner” group linked the Russian Wagner paramilitaries in Mali to 23 incidents of human rights abuse since the 2020 coup. This peaked in March 2022, when the Malian military and Wagner executed some 300 civilians in the town of Moura. Similarly, in the Central African Republic, Wagner mercenaries have abducted, tortured and killed people on an “unabated and unpunished” basis, according to a U.N. report, which claimed a Wagner-linked Russian company “secured gold and diamond mining licenses.” Once again, brutality peaked in March 2022, when Wagner massacred more than 100 gold miners from Sudan, Chad, Niger and the Central African Republic.

Wagner began operating in Africa in 2017, invited by Sudan’s then-dictator Omar al-Bashir and gaining its first gold-mining concession. Russia’s need for gold surged following its Ukraine invasion and sanctions.

Do the communities to which these murdered villagers and miners belong see themselves as part of a pro-Russian Global South uniformly behind the U.N. abstentions of Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan? Or are these votes better explained as representing the interests of these violent Russian-backed neocolonial rulers?

Another abstaining government was Ethiopia, whose recent two-year war against its Tigray region killed some 600,000 people. Is its abstention a voice “against Western hypocrisy,” despite strong U.S. support for the government? Did Tigrayans get a vote? Eritrea, which joined Ethiopia’s war on Tigray, was the only African state to vote with Moscow in the U.N. Given past Soviet support to the Ethiopian Derg’s brutal war against Eritrean independence, this vote cannot be explained by anti-colonial memories. Isaias Afwerki’s Eritrean dictatorship was accused in a 2021 Human Rights Watch report of “subjecting its population to widespread forced labor and conscription, with no legislature, no independent civil society organizations or media outlets, and no independent judiciary.”

Moving on to Brazil, both the previous, far-right Bolsonaro administration and the current left-of-center government of President Luiz Inacio Lula have been partial to Russia’s viewpoint. Bolsonaro saw Putin (and Trump) as an ideological ally. On the eve of Russia’s invasion, he turned up in Moscow to declare “deep solidarity” with Russia. While his government formally voted to condemn the invasion, Bolsonaro blasted that stand, claiming that Ukrainians “trusted a comedian with the fate of a nation.” Brazil later abstained in the U.N. Security Council from condemning the annexations in eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, trade between Brazil and Russia ballooned. While Lula criticized Russia’s invasion, he claimed Ukraine was “as responsible” as Russia for the war.

Yet, according to a survey conducted by Morning Consult, “the share of Brazilian adults with a favorable view of Russia plunged from 38% to 13%” since the invasion of Ukraine, “while the share with an unfavorable view surged from 28% to 59%.” Meanwhile, 62% of Brazilians say they side with Ukraine, compared with only 6% who side with Russia. This suggests quite the opposite of “pressure from the anti-imperialist masses.”

Notably, while several Latin American countries with leftist governments had abstained in U.N.

votes, others — Chile, Mexico and Colombia — voted to condemn along with the overwhelming majority. On the occasion of the July 18 summit of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in Brussels, Chile's leftist president, Gabriel Boric, condemned Russia's invasion as "an unacceptable imperialist war of aggression that violates international law." The proposed resolution on Ukraine was watered down to reach consensus with ambivalent governments but nevertheless expressed "deep concern on the ongoing war against Ukraine, which continues to cause immense human suffering," with only Nicaragua dissenting.

India's U.N. abstentions represent a mix of traditional Russia-India ties; playing Russia off against China, which India sees as its main rival; and the global positioning of a BRICS subimperialist elite. In addition, as with Bolsonaro, the alliance with far-right Putinism is deeply ideological for Modi's Hindu-supremacist ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Shortly after the invasion began, members of the Indian extreme-right organization Hindu Sena demonstrated in support of Putin and his war. Hindu Sena President Vishnu Gupta advocated that India put "boots on the ground" to support Russia. The far-right concept of Akhand Bharat, which envisions the entire subcontinent from Afghanistan to Myanmar as part of an "undivided" nation with India at its core, is reminiscent of Russian ultranationalist views pushed by ideologues such as Alexander Dugin and taken up by Putin, holding that former parts of the Russian Empire belong to Russia. Dubbed "Putin's brain" after Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, Dugin is an influential Russian philosopher who champions Russian imperial conquest in the name of what he calls "neo-Eurasianism."

Modi, who was involved in the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, heads a deeply chauvinistic regime in a country where the number of billionaires blossoms next to the greatest number of absolute poor on Earth. Is it really likely that the hundreds of millions of socially and economically oppressed and marginalized women, Dalits and minorities hold the same pro-Putin views as Modi's regime or that these views "reflect" anti-colonial memories from the struggle against Britain?

The value of small surveys is questionable in such a large and diverse country, but from what we have, an Ipsos poll in May 2022 found that, while 6 in 10 Indians supported maintaining relations with Russia and opposed sanctions, 77% believed that sanctions imposed by others were "an effective tactic for stopping the war," while 70% believed "doing nothing will embolden Russia" to extend the war elsewhere. In a Blackbox Research survey in March, only 4% of Indian respondents had a positive image of Moscow, 60% blamed Russia for the conflict and 91% sympathized with Ukraine.

At face value, this suggests at the very least that Indian respondents were more sympathetic to Ukraine than the BJP regime is. Interestingly, support for Russia seems stronger on social media, likely representing upper-middle-class views. Among the justifications expressed, however, "anti-colonialism" does not get a mention; rather, it is all about "historic India-Russia ties," Russia being India's major arms supplier, and stopping Russia from bending too far toward China. But the advanced weaponry that India buys from Russia is not intended for fighting the ghost of British colonialism. It more likely targets the occupied Kashmiris or helps build the arsenal of its anti-China "Quad" alliance with the U.S., Australia and Japan.

With China's population of 1.4 billion, again a survey of relatively small numbers of people cannot tell us much, and the almost total Chinese Communist Party monopoly on media (including social media) makes discerning popular views even more difficult. Still, the Blackbox survey cited above found that a mere 8% of Chinese respondents had a positive image of Moscow and 71% sympathized with Ukraine, while only 10% blamed Russia for the conflict. What to make of this contradiction is unclear, but we can state some general points.

First, is it logical to assume that the colonized Tibetan masses or the Muslim Uyghur population of Xinjiang — where 1 million people are subject to forced assimilation — hold similar views to the Han-chauvinist regime? In a country that boasts over 900 billionaires, how likely is it that the brutally exploited “floating population” of migrant workers — one-fifth of the population, upon whose backs China’s “miracle” was built — would tend to agree with their exploiters? Or that the government’s policies would “reflect” their “anti-imperialist” views?

Secondly, China’s policy of abstaining in U.N. votes while stressing that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, including Ukraine, must be respected,” is better explained as reflecting the policy of an assertive new imperialist power than as some kind of “anti-imperialist” consciousness of “a fifth of the world’s population.” In his first post-pandemic trip abroad to Kazakhstan — a former Soviet republic with a large Russian minority — Chinese leader Xi offered strong support to Kazakhstan’s “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Russia is both an imperial ally and rival, and China prefers it as a vassal rather than an equal — which Putin has all but guaranteed with his Ukraine quagmire.

Xi’s lavish state visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, which involved the two countries forging a strategic partnership agreement and Chinese and Saudi firms signing 34 investment deals, was a major move into traditional American and Russian territory. Meanwhile, with Putin’s invasion torpedoing Nord Stream and the strong Russian-German economic relationship, Germany opened the way for a major Chinese shipping group to buy a large stake in the strategic port of Hamburg.

Global surveys tend to back up the findings of national and supranational surveys. An Open Society survey carried out among 21,000 people in 22 countries, most in the Global South, found “strong and widespread support” for the view that peace requires Russia to “withdraw from all parts of Ukrainian territory.” The only exceptions were Senegal (46%), India (44%), Indonesia (30%) and Serbia (12%). The populations most strongly supporting this view included Kenya (81%), Nigeria (71%), Brazil (68%) and Colombia (67%), all higher than in the U.S., Japan, France and Germany. Conspicuously absent was any difference along general Global North/Global South lines.

A partial contrast was provided by an Ipsos survey of 19,000 people in 27 countries, but this focused on questions related to their country imposing sanctions or getting involved militarily. It is therefore not surprising that the higher levels of support were in Europe, as discussed above. However, the countries where the largest numbers were against any kind of “action” or “interference” included Hungary, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — hardly a typical list representing Global South “anti-imperialism.”

While these surveys of thousands in populations of millions require a cautious approach, without better data we can tentatively say that none suggests any groundswell of support for Russia or its invasion in the Global South, but rather the contrary. This is despite the tendency of “public opinion” to be defined by elites anyway. The fact that surveyed majorities appear to be more sympathetic to Ukraine than their governments are suggests quite a conscious view among many in the Global South. Again, a reasonable objection is that millions desperately concerned with daily survival are likely to have no opinion on a European war, but this offers even less support to the contention that the views and votes of these governments “reflect” any opinions among their populations.

I therefore return to an explanation that relies not on equating oppressive ruling elites with their populations but rather on the interests of these elites themselves: the subimperial nature of the relatively powerful states leading the abstention or otherwise ambivalent faction, whose actions reflect their geopolitical positioning among American, European, Russian and Chinese imperialisms, and who have used the crisis of this global conflict to improve their bargaining positions.

While this is by no means the final word on the causes of the effective neutrality or pro-Russian orientation of various ruling classes and governments in the Global South, it is more grounded in empirical reality than the narrative according to which these governments merely reflect a popular anti-colonial groupthink in the Global South, translated into support for a white, European colonial project (Russian imperial conquest).

BRICS is in the process of expanding, with a range of countries including Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE interested in joining. Some of these applications might be discussed at the upcoming summit in Johannesburg. While there are no formal membership criteria, countries with large populations or economies appear to be the norm for the bloc, making it an alternative to the domination of the world economy by the G7 (the world's seven richest economies).

The BRICS Development Bank sees itself as an alternative to the Western-dominated International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and focuses on infrastructure lending. Some non-BRICS members, such as Egypt and the UAE, have already bought shares in it. Right now, BRICS states are attempting to undermine the dollar's global dominance by trading with one another in nondollar denominations. Whether much will come of this is unclear, but reducing the global dominance of one set of countries and institutions is a desirable goal.

But it is a mistake to confuse this with the idea that the ruling elites of the subimperial BRICS countries represent the entire Global South, let alone its billions of people. In itself, BRICS represents a layer between the G7 and the rest of the Global South, and has its own interests — which can conflict with both. Indeed, China's rise is so much more spectacular than that of any other BRICS states that it threatens to turn BRICS into a support club for a new world power. Meanwhile, Russia's repudiation of the grain deal and its attacks on Ukrainian ports are a grave threat to the welfare of the millions of people in the Global South who rely on Ukrainian food exports.

This all reinforces the argument that the neutral or ambivalent stances of the BRICS countries (and similar large states) toward Russia's war against Ukraine represent the interests of these emerging powerful elites themselves, rather than those of the billions of people in the Global South.

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