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Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Women's Contrarian Views on the Russia-Ukraine War

By Narayanappa Janardhan¹

Abstract

Most reactions to the Russia-Ukraine War, especially in the West, have been critical of Moscow's aggression and sympathetic to Ukraine. But there is also a view, especially in the East, that the situation is not as black and white as it is made out to be, that there is a gray-area in global affairs related to the conflict. This research article highlights contrarian views from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and the reasons for the same. It also examines contrarian women's perspectives on how underplaying the plight of war-affected women in the Middle East, compared to highlighting the plight of Ukrainian women, is tantamount to hypocrisy. It argues that these contrarian views are partly rooted in ideological moorings and also economic, political, and security concerns. Using empirical data from secondary sources, this article also contends that such reactions do not condone Russia's belligerence but reflect a growing multipolar global order where strategic ambivalence on global affairs is a new tool to promote strategic autonomy as well as often-ignored human security.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, Responses to Russia-Ukraine War, Asia, Africa, Middle East, Women.

Introduction

A meme did the rounds as soon as the Russia-Ukraine War began in late February 2022. It read: "International relations exam question: What do you call a country's action that involves sending troops and tanks across its border? Answer: It depends. If it is U.S. troops and tanks in Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq, it is 'liberation'! If it is Russian troops and tanks in Ukraine, it is 'invasion.'" The meme's sarcasm played out in the real world too.

While most of the world condemned Russia's aggression, there have also been some contrarian reactions, challenging the conventional narrative apportioning the blame only on Russia. Some of these reactions are from Western scholars, but most are from governments and intellectuals from pockets of Africa and Asia, including the Middle East and the Gulf, and some from ordinary people, including women, from these regions as well. This article highlights such contrarian views and the reasons for the same, along with contrarian women's perspectives on how underemphasizing the plight of war-affected women in the Middle East compared to highlighting the plight of Ukrainian women is tantamount to hypocrisy.

The academic motive of emphasizing contrarian views is to draw attention to an entire genre of alternative narratives on any given subject, which in this case is the Russia-Ukraine War.

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Irrespective of whether we agree with these views or not, it is important to highlight them because the truth most often lies in between what proponents of both extremes view as the truth.

Another reason for taking the contrarian approach is that amid this Cold War-like scenario, “powerful statesmen, diplomats, journalists, and military strategists seem to forget that political gambling has real-life consequences: human insecurity and widespread suffering” which affects ordinary people, particularly women (Santoire, 2022). As Santoire notes, “In every war, the resulting humanitarian crisis deepens and aggravates the inequities of the patriarchal system in place” (Santoire, 2022). Only when perspectives from both spectrums are discussed will the issue be comprehensively assessed.

The fundamental arguments and questions in this approach are fourfold. 1) It is less about who is right or wrong in their aggressive and defensive actions, but more about whether or not all the parties, including the U.S. and West, do enough to prevent the war. 2) After the war began, did the US and the West do more to de-escalate or enflame the war? 3) How should we rationalize the West’s differing approaches to similar problems at different times in various parts of the world? and 4) While some governments and scholars are rooted in ideology, others are less so, instead taking a very pragmatic and practical approach based on convenience rather than dogma.

Further, highlighting such views is equally important from a Global South perspective, which receives less attention than it merits in the West. Such reactions reflect a growing multipolar system in the global order, which has been defined as a “multiplex”-- i.e., multiple powers in a complex world (Acharya, 2017). The debates in the United Nations and outside on this issue suggest that strategic ambivalence in the Global South positions on international affairs is a new tool among certain countries to promote their strategic autonomy, which should not be dismissed as absurd or irrelevant.

Western Alternative Views

American political scientist John Mearsheimer, also a proponent of the realist school in international relations and a critic of U.S. foreign policy, endorses the idea that to preserve national security in the face of adversaries, countries will act preemptively. He argues that encouraging NATO to expand eastward and cozying up to Ukraine heightened tensions between the superpowers and even laid the groundwork for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Similarly, he insists that “the West, especially the United States, is principally responsible” for Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Chotiner, 2022).

Noam Chomsky asks “What is the best thing to do to save Ukraine from a grim fate, from further destruction?” and answers: “and that’s to move towards a negotiated settlement” (not arm and encourage Ukraine to fight Russia, which) . . . “made negotiations impossible and may have led to war.” He also suggests that the U.S. support for Ukraine is more about ousting the current regime in Russia than helping Ukraine defend itself (Scahill, 2022).

David Hendrickson, President of the John Quincy Adams Society, argues that “America’s original sin in Ukraine was supporting the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution” (Hendrickson, 2022). Canadian scholar Paul Robinson similarly traces the roots of the ongoing conflict to the West’s support for the 2014 revolution. He stresses that:

States seek status, and those who have risen to the top (the U.S. and its Western allies) feel a need to put anyone who might challenge them firmly in their place. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is such a challenge. Ever since 2014, the West has determined that Ukraine lies

within its own sphere of influence. By arguing otherwise, Russia is challenging the West's honor. The West feels that it must respond or lose face. (Robinson, 2022)

Analyzing the war, Niall Ferguson claims that "Putin misunderstands history. So, unfortunately, does the U.S...Biden is making a colossal mistake in thinking he can bleed Russia dry, topple Putin and signal to China to keep its hands off Taiwan. Every step of this strategy is based on dubious history" (Ferguson, 2022). Even before the war, Stephen Cohen contended that the West had "disregarded Russia's interests for years and that Putin's actions were fully understandable" (Baumann, 2019).

Most scholars and countries arguing thus have also insisted that blaming the U.S. or NATO should not be interpreted as justification for Russian actions. They critique the Western approach by insisting that sending military equipment to Ukraine is a continuation of the "resist Russia" policy that has been in vogue since the Cold War, which intensified after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Analyzing these reactions, Joseph Dillard explains that most of our views are "subjective and biased," and we find reasons to back our defined ideas, even seeing value in promoting less popular views (Dillard, 2022). Alexey Kovalev highlights the rationale of another contrarian segment or grouping: "For 'peace activists,' war is about America, never Russia. Their own hard-left worldview is so absorbing that they will take the side of any aggressor in the anti-Western camp...the reflex to align with the anti-American camp is stronger than any disapproval" (Kovalev, 2022).

Another narrative is that contrarian views, especially from the Russian media, have been "completely blocked in the West" because the "Western governments simply do not want their public to know that the world is vastly changing" (Baroud, 2022). Noam Chomsky claims that there is no moral justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and compares it to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He also points out the main reason for this war, which the mainstream media ignored, is "NATO expansion...This is not just my opinion...it is the opinion of every high-level U.S. official in the diplomatic services who has any familiarity with Russia and Eastern Europe" (Baroud, 2022).

Beyond the academic debate, contrarian views in Russia, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East are partly rooted in connections spanning economic, political, and security domains. For some, Russia is a source of energy, food, fertilizer, general trade, and military equipment. For others, relations with Russia have strategic value vis-a-vis the U.S. and the West, and sometimes the issue is about balancing ties between the U.S. and Russia and China. These complexities help explain why some Asian-African-Mideast governments have been reluctant to openly condemn Russia's war against Ukraine or impose sanctions despite having had their own experiences with colonialism, war, territorial and maritime disputes, and ethnic and cultural differences.

Women's Perspectives

Though Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) contributes to a better understanding of the alliance's role in the global power order and intersects with and shapes new security threats, some argue that WPS was not invoked in NATO's initial response to the Russia-Ukraine War. They specifically identify the absence of women in both Ukrainian and Russian negotiation delegations.

According to these critics, NATO is an "institution of international hegemonic masculinity" despite the organization's assertion that "gender equality is an integral part of all

NATO policies, programs and projects” (Wright, 2022). Though the alliance’s three core tasks are “collective” defense, crisis management, and cooperative security, NATO and its partners’ articulation of the relevance of gender in their response to the Russian intervention in Ukraine has been found lacking. Even countries with feminist foreign policies, such as Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Sweden questioned NATO’s WPS commitments.

Some organizations drew attention to “women giving birth in underground metro stations and newborns hastily being moved to makeshift bomb shelters” as a result of the war (“Ukraine,” 2022). More than 900 babies are estimated to have been born every day since the war began, taking a serious toll on the health of women and children (Save the Children, 2022). This adds to the women’s suffering from the conflict in eastern Ukraine that has prevailed since 2014 as well as gender-based violence which has affected 67% of Ukrainian women (“Ukraine,” 2022). Nearly eight million people, the majority of them women and children, had fled Ukraine by December 2022, which impacted neighboring countries including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, among other European countries (UN News, 2022). An even greater number are reported to have been displaced within the country. Further, as schools, children and geriatric care centers, and hospitals were either destroyed or closed due to war, women’s care burden increased leaving little time for their personal well-being (Khullar, 2022). While these were general women’s concerns, the head of a women’s center in Idlib, Syria, highlighted a particular contrarian perspective:

I very much feel for the people of Ukraine... We Syrians know what we’re talking about... I survived a poison gas attack by the Syrian regime. I know what it's like to live under a hail of bombs... Due to the inaction of the international community in Syria, Putin was given the green light to take brutal action elsewhere ... He has nothing to fear from the West... There have not been such harsh sanctions in so many years of war in Syria ... There seems to be something like first-class and second-class refugees... I hope the fate of the Syrian refugees will also be taken very seriously. There are people still drowning in the Mediterranean, or freezing to death at European borders or stuck in makeshift camps in Greece for years. (Hodali, 2022)

On a related note, despite the risks involved in war reporting and the stereotypical branding of Arab women, Middle Eastern news outlets were quick to respond in reporting live from the ground and even deployed women to do so. Among the prominent Arab women covering the war were Najlaa Aboumerhi of Qatar’s Al-Araby TV, Christiane Baissary of Saudi Arabia’s Al-Hadath, Diyala Khalili from Saudi Arabia’s Ashraq News, and Qatar-based Al-Jazeera’s Ranya Dridri, among others. In fact, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabia’s Al-Arabiya journalist Atwar Bahjat, an Iraqi, lost her life reporting on the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2006, with militants hunting down her and her colleagues and killing them in cold blood in Samarra (Fouad, 2022).

Middle East Dynamics

The responses of the Middle East governments ranged from rejecting Russia’s hostile moves to treating them as an extension of current policies. They could be broadly categorized into a pro-Russia camp, an anti-invasion camp (because of their own experience of being invaded), and those who sit on the fence between the other two camps.

While Turkey’s government rejected Moscow’s recognition of the two breakaway republics, calling the invasion “unjust and unlawful” (Dene et al., 2022), Israel expressed support

for Ukraine's territorial integrity without mentioning Russia explicitly. Syria affirmed Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk. The state media considered the move as an extension of existing policies. Syria claimed that "Western countries bear responsibility for chaos and bloodshed as a result of their policies aimed at controlling peoples, as these countries use their dirty methods to support terrorists in Syria and the Nazis in Ukraine and in various parts of the world" (Dene et al., 2022).

Similarly, Yemen's Houthi leadership supported Russia's recognition of the "independent republics" (Dene et al., 2022). It, however, also advocated restraint not to "slip into a war intended to drain Russian capabilities" (Dene et al., 2022). In contrast, the internationally recognized Yemeni government voted in favor of the March U.N. General Assembly resolution denouncing Russia's invasion. Iran said that "NATO expansion is a serious threat to the stability and security of independent countries in different regions" (Dene et al., 2022). Other Iranian officials stated that they opposed the war but held the West responsible for stoking the conflict. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that "U.S. interference through velvet movements and color coups...pulled Ukraine into where it is now" (Al-Monitor, 2022).

An Iraqi prominent leader said that the Russian invasion is not justified because Iraq "gained nothing but ruin, weakness, and dispersal amid exacerbation of extremism and terrorism" (Dene et al., 2022). While Lebanon's government was critical of Russia's actions, a major constituent of the government, Hezbollah, blamed Washington:

Western countries have done everything against Russia except for direct combat. Today, the world only respects the strong, and it has remained silent in the face of U.S. violations...The United States is to blame for the crisis in Ukraine, as Washington had been inciting and working on this scenario for weeks...Moscow has the right to protect its borders and national security. (Dene et al., 2022)

While the Gulf countries gained economically due to the rise in energy prices from about \$70 to \$130 after the outbreak of the war, they were in a politically awkward position caught between their traditional security guarantor, the U.S., and their newer international strategic partner, Russia. As a result, they did not take an unambiguous position. Instead, they urged the warring countries to show restraint. This reaction could be explained in the backdrop of the U.S.'s abstruse signs of disengagement from the Middle East as part of its "pivot to Asia" to counter China.

Qatar and Kuwait first called for a diplomatic solution that would recognize Ukraine's territorial integrity. Qatar then allowed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to make an online address at its annual Doha Forum (Associated Press, 2022). Saudi Arabia backed support for international efforts to de-escalate the situation through dialogue and diplomacy. The U.A.E. abstained in the U.N. Security Council vote on the U.S.-sponsored resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Washington, however, did manage to get all the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including Oman and Bahrain, to back the first and second General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine in March (Hiltermann et al., 2022).

Overall, while no country overtly backed Russia, their challenging the U.S. position on the war was a major shift in the geopolitics of the region wherein strategic autonomy determined their nuanced stance rather than the events on the ground or the dictates of the reigning powers.

From an economic perspective, the Middle East responses throw some signals at the future of the OPEC-plus alliance, which Saudi Arabia co-leads with Russia. Saudi Arabia is keen to stick to OPEC-plus production to ensure higher oil prices, to which Russia is more sympathetic

than the U.S. and the E.U. (Weiss and Alexander-Greene, 2022). This is likely to push the Saudi GDP towards the \$1 trillion mark in 2022, the International Monetary Fund said (Al-Arabiya, 2022).

Qatar also responded to U.S. requests to ramp up gas supplies to Europe by stating that it does not have the capacity to replace Russian gas supplies to the continent (El Dahan et al., 2022). But Qatar has increased energy supplies since then. Qatar is already producing optimum yields of gas. It is unlikely to wade into making up for Europe's shortfall in a big way. But as a major non-NATO ally and home to the U.S. airbase at Al Udaid, Qatar is vulnerable to pressure, especially after Turkey's tough approach on Russia.

Though many Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries do not source energy or agricultural products directly from Russia or Ukraine, fuel price increase, shortage of food products and fertilizers, as well as a dip in Russian tourist inflow led to rapid inflation in an economic slowdown caused by COVID-19. Food security issues became a concern. Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia rely on wheat imports from both Russia and Ukraine, with the Middle East and Africa receiving about 70% of Russia's wheat exports in 2021 (Jacobs, 2022). This adversely impacted citizens in the Middle East and Africa and forced their governments, already under pressure, to take emergency action. These measures included resorting to protectionist policies like restricting exports and re-exports of food products like cereals, vegetables, and oils, which constrained food product supplies in other parts of the world.

On a positive note, high oil prices enabled the Gulf's post-COVID-19 economic recovery and ensured against budget deficits. According to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), every \$10 per barrel increase in oil price added \$65 billion to the Gulf countries' oil export revenue (Sim, 2022). From the U.A.E. perspective, trade disruption was not worrisome because its exports to Russia accounted for just about 5 per cent of the total trade turnover in 2022 (Smagin, 2023). The U.A.E.'s and Saudi investments in Russia could also witness turbulence.

Many other aspects remain unclear—the future of several arms deals; impact on the Syrian stabilization process; and parallels with a potential China-Taiwan crisis. Since Russia and the U.A.E. are among top suppliers of aluminum to the E.U., will the U.A.E. be able to export more and benefit from higher prices? Finally, there is plenty of diplomatic opportunity for the Gulf countries to test if their hedging policy of the last decade is effective. The crisis offers a chance for many countries in the region to experience maneuvers while standing apart from the United States. The U.A.E., for example, has had the opportunity to dabble in overt diplomatic games (via its U.N. Security Council stint) rather than keep silent or play coy.

Several Russian banks have also been cut out of SWIFT² that connects about 11,000 banks in 200 countries. With Russia insisting that Europe use Russian rubles to purchase gas and Saudi Arabia and China discussing energy purchase in yuan, the West's hegemony over currency is being shaken, thus impacting the West's geostrategic dominance.

In the economic domain, Dubai benefitted from an unlikely spinoff in the real estate sector. While Russians were a big draw in the U.A.E.'s tourism and shopping sector, they became one of the biggest clients of the real estate sector following the Ukraine invasion and the consequent international sanctions. Facilitating the process was Dubai's reputation for "high living standards, low taxes, and easy visa requirements for Russians...and there's none of the Russophobia that's growing elsewhere in the world because of the war" (Rohan, 2022).

² The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication.

Data shows that between July and September 2022, some 277,000 Russians traveled to the U.A.E.—three times more than during the same period in 2019 (Rohan 2022). Defying global trends, the Dubai property market has jumped by 73%, rents are up 27% annually, and sales of the most exorbitant homes have increased by 50% (Lawford, 2022). It is estimated that prices of luxury apartments could grow by another 13.5% in 2023 (Lawford, 2022).

Double Standards

Beyond the official response, without condoning the events in Ukraine, many people and analysts in the Middle East viewed the Western analyses and reports of the Russia-Ukraine War from the lens of double standards. Their principle argument was that the sympathy afforded to Ukrainians was rarely afforded to the people of the Middle East during their multiple recent wars and crises, especially in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Libya and Yemen, among others. They argued that the term Middle East “refugee” in the Western media often had a racial implication even though the “West was directly involved” in the staggering refugee crises (Mohyeldin, 2022). MSNBC writer Ayman Mohyeldin argues that “The response from the West [to the refugee crisis] was feeble at best.” While the U.S. and Europe were hesitant to unconditionally welcome Middle East people fleeing their wars, Ukrainians received a warmer “visa-free” welcome (Mohyeldin, 2022).

Worse still, some appalling justification of the double standards were highlighted. A Western journalist reported that Ukraine is “relatively civilized, relatively European...where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen” as opposed to Iraq or Afghanistan (Nugent, 2022). Explaining the distinction between the Western “us” and the Middle Eastern “them,” another was quoted as saying: “We're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We are talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives” (Bayoumi, 2022).

The racial aspect extended to the officialdom as well, with Ukraine's former deputy chief prosecutor David Sakvarelidze saying: “It's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair being killed” (Webbe, 2022). In a different context, the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell went a step further claiming that “Europe is a garden...the rest of the world is a jungle” (Liboreiro, 2022).

The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists' Association condemned “examples of racist news coverage that ascribes more importance to some victims of war than others...This type of commentary reflects the pervasive mentality in Western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Latin America” (Agence France-Presse, 2022). AdeelaOfficial, an Instagram account offering humorous commentary broke its protocol to decry media “racism...The Western media claims to protect human rights and defend democracy, when in reality it is ignorant, racist and cannot see beyond its own nose” (Agence France-Presse, 2022).

A sarcastic solution to Middle Eastern refugees getting better treatment was: “Perhaps we should be encouraging Syrians and Afghans to open Netflix accounts? Buy fancier cars? Post more pictures on Instagram? The answer, of course, is simple. Maybe if Syrians were ‘just like us,’ they would receive a more compassionate welcome in Europe and the West” (Mohyeldin, 2022). Some reactions in the West empathized with the angry Middle Eastern sentiments:

The bloody Russian invasion of Ukraine should open our eyes to other more distant wars ...some of those wars have been started by our own governments in the West. The invasion and occupation of Iraq (‘shock and awe’, as they boasted) reportedly led to up to 1 million

deaths, as well as the birth of Islamic State; the invasion of Libya, which was supported by NATO, has caused turmoil and misery in the region. The long-term effects of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, which NATO also supported, are now clear to see. Food for thought. (Letters, 2022)

Africa's Response

Among 34 countries worldwide that abstained from the U.N. vote in February 2022, 17 were African. Nigeria and Egypt voted to condemn Russia, while eight others didn't vote (Mills & Inwood, 2022). Eritrea was the only one to vote against the resolution, alongside Russia, Belarus, Syria, and North Korea. Many of these countries took a similar stance during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Russia has built several economic and military alliances with governments in African countries facing violent insurgencies or political instability, which influenced their stance during the current crisis. Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal criticized Moscow. Those who abstained included South Africa, Mali, Mozambique, the Central African Republic (CAR), Angola, Algeria, Burundi, Madagascar, Namibia, Senegal, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. According to a South African analyst Steven Gruzd:

Do not expect strident condemnations from those countries where there is a large Russian presence, especially from private military contractors like the Wagner Group—CAR, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sudan, and Libya. (Smith, 2022)

There's a strand of thought in African diplomacy that says African states should maintain the principle of non-interference and so they shouldn't get caught up in (East-West) proxy war. (Busari, 2022)

The South African government contributed with the sentiment: "Our position is very clear...there are those who are insisting that we should take a very adversarial stance and position against, say Russia. And the approach that we have chosen to take...is we are insisting that there should be dialogue" (Busari, 2022). But it also blamed NATO: "The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region" (Busari, 2022). Zimbabwe said it was unconvinced that the U.N. resolution was driven towards dialogue, rather "it poured more fuel to the fire, thus complicating the situation" (Busari, 2022).

Some African countries did not criticize Russia because they want to "keep their options open if they face some kind of revolution in the future...They saw Putin keep Assad in power in Syria" (Busari, 2022). Some analysts also pointed out that the muted response stems from what is perceived as Western hypocrisy: "The message that Moscow is pushing is that if you are tired of the paternalistic way the West approaches you, we are going to be your security partners. It will be a relationship of equals" (Busari, 2022).

Unlike many of its European counterparts, Russia is not a former colonial power in Africa and so has soft power to challenge Western dominance on the continent. The Soviet Union also had client relationships with many African states during the Cold War, and Moscow has looked to revive some of those ties. In recent years, Russia has established itself as one of Africa's most valuable trading partners, becoming a major supplier of military hardware to Nigeria, Libya,

Ethiopia, and Mali. Africa accounted for 18% of Russian arms exports between 2016 and 2020, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Smith, 2022).

Yet Africa has often been at the heart of the tussle for influence in the great power competitions between key geopolitical players such as the U.S., China, and Russia. Some countries are trying to leverage this position in a variety of ways, with reactions to the Russia-Ukraine War being one of them. Tanzania, for example, has identified the current situation as a chance for its energy industry to profit, according to analyst Yetunde Odugbesan-Omede:

Tanzania’s president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, sees this as an opportunity to look for markets to export gas...Tanzania has the sixth largest gas reserve in Africa. While some African countries will sustain some economic shock from the Russian-Ukraine fight, others are trying to weather the storm by looking for new avenues of profitability. (Busari, 2022)

Attitudes towards U.S. military policy among Africans reflect the opinion that “reckless approach by Washington and Wall Street will have a negative social impact on billions around the globe” (Azikiwe, 2022). Further, at the beginning of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, African students were subjected to racist discrimination, along with Asians, while seeking refuge in Ukraine’s neighboring countries. They were denied entry into trains and refused food:

While the Western corporate and government-controlled media outlets build their cases for the unconditional support of the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine, the experiences of African students attempting to flee the war has revealed the discriminatory racist nature of the authorities now in power in Kiev...These incidents are not surprising considering the expansion and institutionalization of fascist and Nazi ideology among those governing the Ukrainian state since the U.S.-backed Euromaidan coup of February 2014. (Azikiwe, 2022)

Table 1: Asian Countries’ Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Support for invasion	Officially neutral	Condemnation of invasion, no action	Condemnation of invasion, aid to Ukraine, sanctions against Russia	No official statement
Myanmar (SAC)	Bangladesh	Indonesia‡	Australia	Bhutan
	China	Maldives	Japan	Mongolia
	India°	Myanmar (NUG)	New Zealand	
	Pakistan	Nepal‡	Singapore	
	Sri Lanka	Philippines	South Korea	
	Most ASEAN member states*	Timor-Leste	Taiwan	
	ASEAN	Pacific Islands Forum		

Source: Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, March 1, 2022.

The reactions in Asia were mixed as evident in Table 1. Myanmar called Russia’s actions “the right thing to do” (VOA News, 2022a). India abstained from a United Nations Security

Council resolution to condemn the attack. And in Vietnam, the Russian president was referred to as “Uncle Putin” (Wee et al., 2022).

China refused to call the assault on Ukraine an invasion. It criticized NATO and condemned Western sanctions on Russia. Beijing recognized Moscow’s security concerns but refrained from backing Russia’s “military actions in Ukraine. China abstained from the U.N. Security Council vote (along with India and the U.A.E.), criticizing Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine rather than vetoing it. This has been interpreted as a limit of China’s support for Russia because despite some shared geopolitical interests with Russia, the West is more important economically for China.

China did not assist Russia in evading economic sanctions, possibly to avoid secondary sanctions. The one immediate benefit of this crisis for China is a distracted West, but a potential unified West over Taiwan if China considers any unilateral action. On the other hand, Taiwan—which China claims to be part of its territory—agreed to Western sanctions.

The 10 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries expressed “deep concern” over “armed hostilities” and called for both sides to “pursue dialogue” in accordance with international law (Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2022). Only Myanmar’s military junta sided with Russia. ASEAN’s response likely stems from economic and national security concerns. Russia’s trade with Southeast Asia is scant (1% of their total trade) but the economies of Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam have significant trade surpluses with Russia and seek to protect such advantages during the post-pandemic recovery period (Hayton, 2022).

Russia is also a key defense supplier for Southeast Asia, with Vietnam and Myanmar being its top customers. U.S. and other international sanctions threaten future Russian arms sales to Southeast Asia. Another concern from the crisis is the precedent on sovereignty in the South China Sea where there are unresolved claims. The territorial disputes here involve conflicting island and maritime claims by several ASEAN members and China, with the former backed by the United States, adding another thread to superpower rivalry.

India and Pakistan, for a change, were on the same side. Both have staked a lot on their relationship with Moscow, seeking energy security, defense supplies, and diplomatic leverage against each other. While India already imports more than half its arms from Russia, it is importing oil at discounted prices and also negotiating buying a Russian-made S-400 missile defense system to counter Pakistan and China (for which the U.S. was considering a sanctions waiver before the war and did drop sanctions months after the war began) (Chakravarty, 2022).

Pakistan is pursuing twin goals with Russia: a) Moscow’s assistance in stabilizing Afghanistan, and b) the \$2.5 billion Russian natural gas pipeline that would run from Karachi to Pakistan’s Punjab region (Ebrahim, 2022). Interestingly, the pipeline may not deliver Russian gas to Pakistan but would draw Qatari gas exports away from Europe to nearby Pakistan, thus forcing Europe to be more dependent on Russian gas.

Japan announced sanctions on Russia’s central bank and an aid package of about \$200 million to Ukraine. Japanese companies are anxious about the impact of sanctions on its automotive industry. Another concern is Japan-Russia financial ties in Arctic development projects. This was one of the reasons that Japan was the only G7 country hesitant to block Russian banks from SWIFT. There is also the decades-old territorial issue between Russia and Japan over the “Northern Territories” that could have influenced Japan’s stance. Amid the ongoing crisis, former prime minister Abe Shinzo suggested that Japan consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons similar to NATO member countries, which meant abandoning Japan’s long standing pacifist

policy. The current premier, Kishida Fumio, however, called the proposal “unacceptable” given the country’s stance against nuclear weapons (Kyodo News, 2022).

South Korea condemned Russia’s invasion and joined Western nations in blocking certain Russian banks from SWIFT. But it also asked Washington to grant some exceptions to U.S. export sanctions on Russia, citing concerns for South Korea’s tech industry, which is linked with both Russia and Ukraine (VOA News, 2022b). North Korea predictably blamed the U.S. and NATO for provoking the conflict in Ukraine while launching a ballistic missile test. The crisis may likely further North Korea’s fear of disarmament and denuclearization.

Responding to a question on why India continues to buy Russian oil, External Affairs minister S. Jaishankar said:

If you are looking at energy purchases from Russia, I would suggest that your attention should be focused on Europe... We do buy some energy which is necessary for our energy security. But I suspect, looking at the figures, probably our total purchases for the month would be less than what Europe does in an afternoon. (Jha, 2022)

Figure 1: Fuels Exported to European and Asian Countries from Russia



Source: Times of India, April 30, 2022.

Jaishankar also said that India has taken a “bigger, longer and more serious” view of the Ukraine war and slammed the West for complaining about India’s position, saying they must live with it just as India lived with differences with them on issues related to Pakistan and Afghanistan (Jha, 2022). The Indian minister also said: “Tough luck if it doesn’t meet your expectations...Historically, we have had differences with Western countries. The differences may have increased or decreased but the differences have never gone away” (Livemint, 2022).

Highlighting the changing priorities in the new world order, Jaishankar added that no region will be stable if dominated by a single power. The minister pointed out that the world order is still Western and it needs to be replaced by a world of “multi-alignment” where countries will choose their own “particular policies and preferences and interests”:

Europeans needed a wake-up call to understand that the difficult aspects of life are not always taken care of by others...During the 2008 financial crisis, Europe took a defensive stance toward the world...Europe wanted to develop within its own space and to keep international problems as far away as possible. It focused on trade, emphasized multilateralism and used its economic influence to shape the world on its own terms on issues such as climate change and human rights. Europe tended not to want to be involved in tough security issues...The Europeans (and Americans) realized the world order changing before the Ukraine conflict...when the Europeans started talking about an Indo-Pacific strategy. I would still like to see a more rules-based world. But when people start pressing you in the name of a rules-based order to give up, to compromise on what are very deep interests, at that stage I'm afraid it's important to contest that and, if necessary, to call it out. (Asian News International, 2023)

Conclusion

The contrarian views on the Russia-Ukraine War in this article do not imply a breakdown of anti-war norms. These voices reflect alternative reasoning, conditioned by different experiences and national interests in different parts of the world that the West has ignored. More importantly, the war drew attention to several ironies. It is ironic that the ongoing war is viewed as a “war for peace” by all the concerned parties. Russia views it as a war aimed at securing peace for itself. Ukraine claims to be fighting to defend peace. And the West is backing Ukraine to counter Russia for the sake of peace in the “democratic” world.

It is equally ironic that a war launched by the West (in Afghanistan and Iraq) is for peace, while a war by anyone else is aggression. It is also ironic that most of Europe continues to benefit from Russian gas supplies but urges the rest of the world to boycott Russian energy supplies, even threatening sanctions.

While many argue that the reactions of outlier countries and people are a flash in the pan, they are clearly more than that. They reflect a trend of more and more countries challenging the West's shifting goalposts and making unreasonable demands, sanctions for example, without considering the difficulties that other countries face in responding to them.

Some governments in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have also pointed out the unjust inconsistencies in how the West responds to humanitarian strife—acting swiftly to help Ukraine in a way that conflicts and refugees in the Middle East have not seen. Rage also erupted among citizens in non-Western countries after some Western journalists and leaders said that Ukraine was not used to witnessing war “like Iraq or Afghanistan,” calling the country a “relatively civilized, relatively European” place.

For those gloating over Russia's setbacks in Ukraine, one should look no further than the U.S. failures in the first two decades of this century, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a useless argument comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the military might of the world's superpowers or praising the resistance of smaller countries. The more pertinent question is: has any recent war achieved its objectives?

Introspection about this question may have conditioned the ambivalent reactions of the outlier countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Realizing the folly of confrontation, some have even challenged the status quo and pushed for diplomacy over war, as is the case with the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia, which have traded containment for dialogue and rapprochement with Iran and Turkey.

Posing a larger geopolitical question, “Does Putin’s invasion of Ukraine revive the fading idea of the West, or hasten the demise of the Western-led international order?” Amitav Acharya answers it thus: “Among its wide-ranging consequences for the international order, Putin’s Ukraine adventure triggering sweeping Western sanctions against Russia has rekindled hopes for a revival of U.S. leadership and Western unity in global affairs” (Acharya, 2017).

Stewart Patrick opines: “In one fateful step, the Russian president has managed to revive Western solidarity, reenergize U.S. global leadership, catalyze European integration, expose Russia’s weaknesses, undermine Moscow’s alliance with Beijing, and make his authoritarian imitators look foolish” (Patrick, 2022).

Even some Eastern analysts think so. Hu Wei, Vice-Chairman of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counselor’s Office of the State Council, feels that due to the Ukraine crisis,

[T]he power of the West will grow significantly, NATO will continue to expand, and U.S. influence in the non-Western world will increase...no matter how Russia achieves its political transformation, it will greatly weaken the anti-Western forces in the world...The West will possess more ‘hegemony’ both in terms of military power and in terms of values and institutions, its hard power and soft power will reach new heights. (Wei, 2022)

But while the Russian invasion is no doubt flawed and could diminish its might, the West’s dominance of world order could also be adversely impacted because Europe is no longer immune to war. This dents European values of order and common security, thus creating a more level playing field between the West and the Rest. The *Economist* underlined this sentiment: “As much as the war’s reverberations are felt around the world, they sound most strongly in Europe. The invasion has upended the idea of a continent ‘whole, free and at peace’” (The Economist, 2022).

Further, while Russia is facing sanctions, which could hurt its economy, the U.S. and other Western countries’ economies are bound to be under pressure should the war endure. Fareed Zakaria, who had talked of a “post-American world” in 2008, said with reference to the war, “One of the defining features of the new era is that it is post-American. By that I mean that the Pax Americana of the past three decades is over” (2022). The Ukraine War will now keep the U.S. busy on two fronts—Russia and China.

It is hard to predict when and how this war will end, but whenever or whatever the end-result, the world is likely to be more multipolar than it is already. In fact, it would be better to designate the evolving world as a “multiplex,” which not only has multiple powerful countries but also:

[I]nternational and regional institutions, corporations, transnational non-governmental organizations, social movements, transnational criminal and terrorist groups, and so on...a multiplex world is like a multiplex cinema—one that gives its audience a choice of various movies...multiple and complex...a world of interconnectedness and interdependence. (Acharya, 2017)

Looking forward, the more central question, in Yuval Harari's words, is: "At the heart of the Ukraine crisis lies a fundamental question about the nature of history and the nature of humanity: is change possible? Can humans change the way they behave, or does history repeat itself endlessly, with humans forever condemned to re-enact past tragedies without changing anything except the décor?" (Harari, 2022).

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