

The World Beyond Ukraine

The Survival of the West and the Demands of the Rest

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Ukraine has united the world,” declared Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a speech on the first anniversary of the start of the war with Russia. If only that were true. The war has certainly united the West, but it has left the world divided. And that rift will only widen if Western countries fail to address its root causes.

The traditional transatlantic alliance of European and North American countries has mobilized in unprecedented fashion for a protracted [conflict in Ukraine](#). It has offered extensive humanitarian support for people inside Ukraine and for Ukrainian refugees. And it is preparing for what will be a massive rebuilding job after the war. But outside Europe and North America, the defense of Ukraine is not front of mind. Few governments endorse the brazen Russian invasion, yet many remain unpersuaded by the West’s insistence that the struggle for freedom and democracy in Ukraine is also theirs. As French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) said at the Munich Security Conference in February, “I am struck by how we have lost the trust of the global South.” He is right. Western conviction about the war and its importance is matched elsewhere by skepticism at best and outright disdain at worst.

The gap between the West and the rest goes beyond the rights and wrongs of the war. Instead, it is the product of deep frustration—anger, in truth—about the Western-led mismanagement of globalization since the end of the [Cold War](#). From this perspective, the concerted Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has thrown into sharp relief the occasions when the West violated its own rules or when it was conspicuously missing in action in tackling global problems. Such arguments can seem beside the point in light of the daily brutality meted out by Russian forces in Ukraine. But Western leaders should address them, not dismiss them. The gulf in perspectives is dangerous for a world facing enormous global risks. And it threatens the renewal of a rules-based order that reflects a new, multipolar balance of power in the world.

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THE WEST APART FROM THE REST

The Russian invasion has produced remarkable unity and action from the liberal democratic world. Western countries have coordinated an extensive slate of economic sanctions targeting Russia. European states have increasingly aligned their climate policies on decarbonization with national security-related commitments to end their dependence on Russian oil and gas. Western governments have rallied to support Ukraine with enormous shipments of military aid. Finland and Sweden aim to be soon admitted to [NATO](#). And Europe has adopted a welcoming policy toward the eight million [Ukrainian refugees](#) within its borders. All these

efforts have been advocated by a U.S. administration that has been sure-footed in partnering with European allies and others. The squabbles over Afghanistan and the AUKUS security partnership (a 2021 deal struck by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States that irked France) seem a long time ago.

Many in the West have been surprised at this turn of events. Clearly, so was the Kremlin, which imagined that its invasion would not provoke a strong and determined Western response. The West's unity and commitment are not matched elsewhere, however. At the beginning of the war, the [UN](#) General Assembly voted 141 to 5, with 47 absences or abstentions, to condemn the Russian invasion. But that result flattered to deceive. As the team of analysts at the International Crisis Group have noted: "Most non-European countries that voted to deplore Russia's aggression last March did not follow up with sanctions. Doing the right thing at the UN can be an alibi for not doing much about the war in the real world."

In a series of UN votes since the war started, around 40 countries representing nearly 50 percent of the world's population have regularly abstained or voted against motions condemning the Russian invasion. Fifty-eight countries abstained from a vote, in April 2022, to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, two-thirds of the world's population live in countries that are officially neutral or supportive of Russia. These countries do not form some kind of axis of autocracy; they include several notable democracies, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa.

Much of the [fence-sitting](#) is not driven by disagreements over the conflict in Ukraine but is instead a symptom of a wider syndrome: anger at perceived Western double standards and frustration at stalled reform efforts in the international system. The distinguished Indian diplomat Shivshankar Menon put the point sharply in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year when he wrote, "Alienated and resentful, many developing countries see the war in Ukraine and the West's rivalry with China as distracting from urgent issues such as debt, climate change, and the effects of the pandemic."

ON THE FENCE

Realpolitik has played its part in determining the positions of certain countries on the Ukraine conflict. [India](#) has traditionally been dependent on Russia for military supplies. The Wagner paramilitary company—the Russian mercenary organization now active in Ukraine—has worked with governments in western and central Africa to support their security and survival. And China, which is one of Russia's principal sources of support, is the largest trading partner of more than 120 countries around the world and has proved unforgiving of diplomatic slights.

But there are also other factors. Some countries contest the Western narrative about the causes of the war. For example, although Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has described the invasion as a "mistake," he has also given credence to the argument that Russia has been wronged. "Zelensky is as responsible as Putin for the war," Lula claimed last summer in a statement that highlighted global ambivalence about the conflict.

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Many observers outside the West also perceive that impunity is, in general, the province of all strong countries, not just Russia. The United States is in an especially weak position to

defend global norms after the presidency of [Donald Trump](#), which saw contempt for global rules and practices in areas as diverse as the climate, human rights, and nuclear nonproliferation. Critics point to the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to claim that hypocrisy, not principle, is driving the West. And U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition's [war in Yemen](#), which spawned a humanitarian crisis in that country, is adduced as evidence of doublespeak when it comes to concern for civilians. It is also argued that the West has shown far more compassion for the victims of war in Ukraine than for the victims of wars elsewhere. The UN appeal for humanitarian aid for Ukraine has been 80 to 90 percent funded. Meanwhile, the UN's 2022 appeals for people caught in crises in Ethiopia, Syria, and Yemen have been barely half funded.

On their own, some of these reasons for sitting on the sidelines might seem petty to Ukrainians fighting on the frontlines. But the wariness of supporting Ukraine must not obscure a bigger problem. The West has failed since the financial crisis of 2008 to show that it is willing or able to drive forward a more equal and sustainable global economic bargain or to develop the political institutions appropriate to manage a multipolar world. This failure is now coming home to roost. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the world was massively off track in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which member states set with great fanfare in 2015. In 2018, four out of five fragile and conflict-ridden states were failing on SDG measures. [World Bank](#) figures for 2020 show that people born in those places were ten times more likely to end up poor as those born in stable countries, and the gap was growing.

Since then, as a result of protracted conflicts, the climate crisis, and the pandemic, the guardrails have come off altogether. More than 100 million people are currently fleeing for their lives from warfare or disaster. The UN reports that 350 million people today are in humanitarian need, compared with 81 million people ten years ago. More than 600 million Africans lack access to electricity. The UN Development Program reports that 25 developing countries are spending over 20 percent of government revenues on debt servicing, with 54 countries suffering from severe debt problems. And the unequal access to vaccines to combat the pandemic—a gulf especially glaring during the early phases of the vaccine rollout in 2021—has become a poster child for empty promises.

Western governments have also failed to fulfill their commitments in other arenas. Donor countries have not yet met their funding commitment of raising \$100 billion a year in climate finance for developing countries. That shortfall is seen as a symbol of Western bad faith: all talk, no walk. The lengthy delays in putting it together have fueled the demand for a new fund to cover “loss and damage” arising from the climate crisis. This new fund was inaugurated last year, but it is not yet funded. Yet another underfunded global initiative will only deepen the deficit of trust between rich countries and poor ones.

HOLLOW SOLIDARITY

If the next two decades are like the last two, marked by the West's confused priorities and failed promises, multipolarity in the global system will come to mean more than greater economic competition. It will mean strengthened ideological challenges to the principles of Western countries and weakened incentives for non-Western countries to associate or cooperate with the West. Instead, liberal democratic countries that support a rules-based global system need to think and act with long-term strategic purpose as they engage with the rest of the world. [China](#) has been doing so since 1990.

Hard power in terms of military partnerships and trade cooperation will be critical in determining the West's relations with the rest of the world. But Western governments also need to attend to a number of soft-power issues, notably in three areas: to offer commitments to solidarity and equity in managing global risks, to embrace reforms that widen the range of voices at the table in international affairs, and to develop a winning narrative in an era when democracy is in retreat. These actions would not only help sustain the global position of the West; they are also the right thing to do.

The call for more solidarity and equity in managing global risks is fundamental to the current moment. [Great-power competition](#) is exacerbating global challenges to the extreme detriment of the poorest countries. The food crisis arising from the war in Ukraine, and the inadequate global response to it, is but one example. This trend makes the efforts of the Center for Global Development to apply a “global public goods” lens to international development especially important. Such goods include programs to lower the risk of pandemics, mitigate climate change, address antimicrobial resistance, and combat nonstate [terrorism](#) and cybercrime. Investment in staving off these looming threats, however, suffers from a market failure: because all people benefit, not just those who pay, no one pays. According to the CGD, around six percent of the total U.S. State Department budget over the past decade went to development-relevant global public goods, and that proportion does not seem to have increased over time.

A Ukrainian soldier in the Donetsk region, Ukraine, April 2023

Kai Pfaffenbach / Reuters

[Pandemics](#) are a good example. In 2022, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, which the World Health Assembly asked the World Health Organization (WHO) to establish and on which I served, published a comprehensive review of the global actions that would be required to prevent and mitigate future pandemics. The report estimated

that the financial cost of pandemic prevention would be \$15 billion per year, less than half what Americans spend on pizza every year.

The most shocking revelation was that 11 high-level panels and commissions in 16 reports over the preceding 20 years had made sensible recommendations about how to prepare for, detect, and contain pandemics, but most of the recommendations had not been implemented. The Independent Panel's conclusion was that this problem could be overcome only by encouraging leaders to mobilize a sustained whole-of-government commitment to pandemic preparedness. We suggested the creation of a Global Health Threats Council separate from the WHO (because pandemics are not just a health issue) with a mission to ensure that governments sufficiently prepare for pandemics, whether through effective surveillance systems or the timely sounding of alarms on outbreaks. This proposal should not be allowed to gather dust.

Support for refugees presents a further example of how global costs are shared unequally. Although many Western countries bemoan the influx of [refugees](#), poor and lower middle-income countries host over 80 percent of them. Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey, and Uganda all take in large numbers of refugees. Poland, currently hosting over 1.6 million Ukrainians, and Germany, with 1.5 million Syrians, are outliers among rich countries. Poor and lower middle-income countries receive limited recompense from richer countries for the responsibilities they bear and therefore have limited incentive to enact policies that promote the inclusion of refugees in work, education, and health systems.

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Two World Bank initiatives reflect a willingness to address the concerns of developing countries hosting large numbers of refugees, but they need to be scaled up significantly. The Window for Host Communities and Refugees program promises to support meaningful medium- to long-term interventions that support low-income countries hosting refugees. Seventy-seven percent of WHR funds have been committed to African countries. But the program needs to be better resourced; expanded to include other multilateral development banks, such as the African Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank; and made more effective through coordination with bilateral sources of aid. Another World Bank initiative, the Global Concessional Financing Facility, does include other multilateral development banks and supports middle-income countries hosting refugees (for instance, the World Bank has allocated Colombia \$1.6 billion to help its efforts with Venezuelan refugees). But contributions to the fund are ad hoc and cannot meet the needs of host countries.

The [climate crisis](#) is the global risk that looms largest and presents the greatest test of the sincerity of Western countries' solidarity with the rest of the world. Wealthy countries need to spend trillions of dollars to decarbonize their economies, but they also need to support low-carbon development in poor countries and pay for the inevitable costs of adaptation to climate change already foreshadowed by current levels of global warming.

The appointment of a new managing director of the World Bank at the 2023 spring meetings is, therefore, of the highest importance. As former U.S. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers has written, "There is an urgent need for the U.S. and its allies to regain the trust of the developing world. There is no better means of regaining trust than through the collective

provision of large-scale support for countries' highest priorities. And there is no more rapid and effective way of mobilizing support than through the World Bank.”

The new leadership of the World Bank will need to make up for lost time. According to the analyst Charles Kenny, the bank's contributions as a proportion of the gross national income of borrowing countries fell from 4.0 percent in 1987 to 0.7 percent in 2020. The World Bank can and should do more. Its far too conservative approach to risk, its too limited range of partners (nongovernmental and governmental), and its culture and modus operandi need to be the focus of reform, alongside the proposals for new financing in Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley's Bridgetown Agenda, which calls for a major new mobilization of funds through international financial institutions for countries grappling with climate change and poverty. The new managing director needs to not only raise more funds but also develop delivery systems that recognize that fragile and conflict-ridden states need to be treated differently from their more stable counterparts.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

In addition to crafting a more equitable way to address global risks, Western countries need to embrace demands from developing countries for a greater say in the international arena. Many countries resent the unbalanced nature of global power in today's international institutions. One recent example occurred during the [pandemic](#). The WHO's Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator was an important initiative intended to drive global access to vaccines, treatments, and diagnostics. But representatives of low-income and middle-income countries were not meaningfully included in the governance of the program. This lack of representation hampered efforts to achieve the fair distribution of vaccines and the effective delivery of other health services.

The case of the UN Security Council veto, at the apex of the international system, provides a useful lens for thinking about how all international institutions need to rebalance the way they work to recognize the realities of modern power. Currently, the five permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have the right to veto any resolution, in effect sidelining the other ten members, many of which are low-income and middle-income countries.

Fundamental reform that would change the number of veto-holding states on the council seems unlikely. But the ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen provide telling examples of how impunity reigns when the Security Council is paralyzed by the veto or the threat to use it. A sign of the frustration regarding this issue is the “veto initiative” passed by the UN General Assembly in 2022, which requires that when a country uses a veto in the Security Council, the General Assembly is automatically convened to discuss the matter at hand. In addition, more than 100 countries have signed on to a French and Mexican proposal, which I support, that calls for the permanent members of the Security Council to agree to refrain from using their veto in cases of mass atrocities. Some permanent members are already exercising restraint. The United Kingdom has not used its veto on any issue since 1989.

The proposal envisions that the UN secretary-general would identify cases that merit the suspension of the veto, based on a clear definition of “mass atrocities.” Such a reform would immediately open the decision-making process in the council to more equitably include the

views of the ten elected members in addition to the five permanent ones. The United States has said it is worried about the potential politicization of the process for identifying atrocities. Although U.S. officials are understandably concerned about the consequences of giving up the veto (albeit in limited circumstances), Moscow's repeated vetoes of resolutions on Ukraine in the past year should give Washington pause as to whether it has more to gain or to lose by refusing to consider limits on the veto.

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

In the battle for global opinion, narrative matters. The preferred Western framing of the war in Ukraine—as a contest between democracy and autocracy—has not resonated well outside Europe and North America. Although it is true that Ukrainians are fighting for their democracy as well as their sovereignty, for the rest of the world the invasion primarily represents a fundamental transgression of international law. So, too, do Russia's [military](#) attacks, which have targeted Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.

There is a better alternative. Western governments should frame the conflict as one between the rule of law and impunity or between law and anarchy rather than one that pits democracy against autocracy. Such an approach has many advantages. It correctly locates democracy among a range of methods for the promotion of accountability and the curbing of the abuse of power. It broadens the potential coalition of support. It tests China at its weakest point because China claims to support a rules-based international system. It also sounds less self-regarding, which is important given the obvious problems plaguing many liberal democracies. A coalition built around the need for international rules is far more likely to be broader than one based on calls for democracy.

To defend the rule of law, however, Western countries must abide by it and subscribe to it. The U.S. condemnation of Chinese breaches of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea—with respect to China's military installations on islands in the South China Sea, for example—would be far more persuasive if the United States ratified the convention. And although U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris made a powerful call at the recent Munich Security Conference for the prosecution of war crimes in Ukraine, it would have been much more effective had the United States ratified the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court in 1998. Critics and adversaries of Western powers relentlessly cite these double standards. And it is not hard to see why.

Migrants in Tunis, Tunisia, March 2023
Jihed Abidellaoui / Reuters

It is worth asking whether it really matters how the rest of the world lines up on Ukraine. Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#), for one, said in a speech in June 2022 that he believes it does, arguing that in the wake of the war, “new powerful centers have formed on the planet,” a reference to the rise of powers such as Brazil, China, and South Africa. These changes, Putin claims, are “fundamental and pivotal.” Meanwhile, China has launched a series of global projects under the rubric of its “Community of Common Destiny Future for Mankind,” including the vast infrastructure investment program known as the Belt and Road Initiative, that reflect the changing global order.

Yet U.S. President Joe Biden spent less than three minutes discussing the wider world beyond Ukraine in his State of the Union address in February, which was more than an hour long. It was a striking lacuna given his administration’s creditable record: over 90 percent of humanitarian aid going to Somalia, for example, currently comes from the United States. An agenda focused on courting the rest of the world has little domestic traction, of course; that is not where the votes are. But other countries also have votes—not in U.S. elections but in how American interests are perceived and advanced around the world. In the case of Ukraine, Russia’s economy has been sustained despite Western sanctions by expanded trade with the non-Western world, new energy alliances, and new sources of weapons supplies. These ties matter.

As a geopolitical entity, the West remains a powerful and influential actor, more so with its newfound unity. To be sure, the relative shares of global income among Western countries will be lower in the twenty-first century than they were in the twentieth. But income per capita in Western countries remains high by global standards. The West’s military and diplomatic strength is real. The alternative systems to democracy are repressive and unattractive.

At the same time, the demands from a variety of countries for a new deal at the international level are in many cases reasonable. Addressing them with urgency and in good faith is essential to building a global order that is satisfactory to liberal democratic states and their citizens. The war in Ukraine has allowed the West to rediscover its strength and sense of purpose. But the conflict should also help Western governments confront their weaknesses and missteps.

Correction appended, April 27, 2023

An earlier version of this article described the goals of the Adaptation Fund, a multilateral climate fund established in 2001. The article stated that the fund was tasked with raising \$100 billion a year in climate finance by 2020, a target set by developed countries in 2009. In fact, that goal was not the responsibility of the fund alone to meet, but rather a collective goal announced by a large group of donor countries and institutions. The fund raises a much smaller amount of financing, mostly to support climate-change adaptation projects in developing countries. Its annual target for 2023, for instance, is \$300 million.