

Inevitable Fractures: The Ukraine War and the Global System

Ashley J. Tellis

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Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022 and continues to this day, promises to be more detrimental to the post–Cold War international order than even the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the controversial U.S. invasion of Iraq that ultimately followed.

Al Qaeda’s attacks on American soil in 2001 were undoubtedly traumatizing, and the U.S. response taxed its military resources for close to two decades thereafter, but these terrorist strikes represented a threat posed by a nonstate actor to an established state, in fact, the most powerful country in the international system. Based on the history of similar challenges elsewhere, the outcome of this struggle seemed preordained once the United States mobilized its resources to deal with the threat. Making things easier, Washington enjoyed the widespread support of the international community as it launched its global war on terror.

Much of this goodwill, unfortunately, was squandered by the later war in Iraq, which was produced by a compromised decisionmaking process within a shocked United States still reeling from the attacks in New York and Washington.¹ Yet even the mistaken premise on which then president George W. Bush’s Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched—that Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein, secretly harbored weapons of mass destruction—does not alter the fact that this counterproliferation campaign was intended to bolster and protect the international order by preventing the spread of nuclear weapons at a time when it was not manifestly clear that Baghdad had given up on its quest to acquire such capabilities.² Clearly, in this conflict, the United States did not seek to destroy Iraq’s existence as a state or alter its national boundaries through violence.

In contrast, Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine represents wanton aggression aimed at the evisceration of an independent state through the forcible annexation of its territory. As such, it violates the fundamental principle enshrined in the UN Charter: that naked force cannot be used to alter territorial boundaries irrespective of the grievances involved, much less eliminate an existing, internationally recognized state.³ As Ingrid (Wuerth) Brunk and Monica Hakimi have persuasively argued, the Russian invasion also “does not have, baked within it, a limiting condition to explain why the use of force might be justifiable here but not in other locations where people continue to harbor historical grievances about the internationally recognized borders that they have inherited.”⁴

Furthermore, it represents an assault by an authoritarian power against a democracy, however imperfect the Ukrainian polity may be.

And—worse—it exemplifies revanchism insofar as Moscow's war to reabsorb (or, failing that, to vivisection) Ukraine is driven by a variety of spurious justifications: that the leadership in Kyiv is characterized by an “aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism” that threatens Russia's hard-won security; that Ukraine “actually never had stable traditions of real statehood” because it “was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia”; and finally that modern Ukraine's physical existence is owed solely to Vladimir Lenin's errant policy of satisfying “the ceaselessly growing nationalist ambitions” of territories “on the outskirts of the former [Russian] empire,” which saw the creation of new states from “territories [that] were transferred along with the population of what was historically Russia.”⁵ In Putin's eyes, these myriad reasons validate Ukraine's reabsorption, in part or in whole, into contemporary Russia, thus making it part of the gradual reconstitution of the Russian Empire, which in its Soviet guise had dissolved with the ending of the Cold War. This reintegration would finally correct what Putin himself described as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,”⁶ namely, the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Not without reason then the dominant view in the West has been that the Russian invasion of Ukraine represents the starkest threat to international order witnessed in the post-Cold War period. It resurrects memories of the last century when great powers, driven either by self-interest or by visions of greatness or by ambitions of rectifying past wrongs, often initiated wars against weaker neighbors on the flimsiest of pretenses. That such recidivist aggression is occurring in Europe, which suffered immensely from such conflicts in the not-too-distant past and struggled mightily for over half a century to avert their recurrence, makes the current war in Ukraine especially galling. And that this long-drawn-out struggle—which began in 2004–05 with Putin's failed effort to sway Ukraine's presidential election, continuing into 2014 with his annexation of Crimea and his intervention in the Donbas, and now culminating in an all-out war against Ukraine—is occurring within one of the core centers of the international system—where both the assailant and many of Ukraine's supporters are indeed major global powers (including some with nuclear weapons)—only makes the conflict even more worrying, especially when its evolution has already witnessed troublesome episodes of nuclear-shadowed coercion by Moscow.⁷

All told then, the early expectation within the United States and Europe, and in the strategic West more generally, was that the international community would stand solidly united in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a blatant violation of the postwar international regime. Both Moscow's motivations and the barbaric manner of the war's execution—the pervasive war crimes, including rape and the “widespread and systematic torture” of civilians,⁸ the kidnapping of Ukrainian children, and the extensive Russian targeting of Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure accompanied by subtle nuclear threats—left no doubt about either Russia's contemptuous attitude toward Ukraine or where blame for the war actually lay.⁹ U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, in fact, went to great lengths to avert this conflict by releasing a stream of U.S. intelligence information about the Russian military buildup prior to the invasion in the hope of mobilizing international opinion against Moscow and thereby persuading Putin to desist from carrying out his planned aggression.¹⁰

These intelligence disclosures subverted the Russian desire for operational surprise and helped to challenge Putin's narrative about the evolving crisis, but regrettably did not evoke the universal outcry that the administration had hoped for. The thorny memory of the previous U.S. intelligence fiasco in the leadup to the Iraq war played a significant role in how the new information about Russia was received, especially in countries suspicious about the United States' warning (to include initially even some of Washington's European partners—and, ironically, even Ukraine itself).¹¹ Although U.S. intelligence this time around would prove to be devastatingly accurate, it was natural that questions about Putin's intentions remained right up to the outbreak of the war. Was the Russian buildup meant to be merely an exercise in coercive diplomacy designed to force both Ukraine and the West to abandon their plans for closer integration (which Moscow had long viewed as an unacceptable threat)? Or had Putin already crossed the Rubicon mentally: was he preparing for an all-out assault on Ukraine to reabsorb it into the Russian Federation or, failing that, to leave behind a rump regime in Kyiv that would accept Ukraine's political subordination to Moscow's preferences?

These questions were fatefully clarified on February 24, 2022, leading Washington to expect that the international community, now having seen both Russian belligerence and brutality clearly unmasked, would in unison condemn Putin's aggressiveness toward its smaller neighbor. However, that was not to be. What became more clearly visible instead were the striking fractures in the global system.

This paper explores the phenomenology of these cleavages. It argues that these divisions are an inevitable consequence of colliding ideas and interests in international politics and, far from being surprised by them, the United States should accept their reality while looking for ways to advance its own interests in a competitive strategic environment.

Rude Awakenings: The Ukraine War and Global Fractures

Although the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not produce the fractures that are now manifestly visible internationally, it has certainly highlighted the cleavages that have gradually emerged in the post–Cold War period. These divisions have been on clear display in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) discussions on the Ukraine war. From March 2022 to February 2023, six resolutions were debated and voted upon in the UNGA, all pertaining to different aspects of the conflict.

- The first resolution, A/RES/ES-11/1, directly condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its nuclear saber-rattling, was supported by 141 countries and opposed by 5, with 35 abstaining and 12 not voting.
- The second resolution, A/RES/ES-11/2, condemning attacks on civilians and demanding a cessation of the Russian aggression, was supported by 140 countries and opposed by 5, with 38 abstaining and 10 not voting.
- The third resolution, A/RES/ES-11/3, suspending Russian membership in the Human Rights Council, was supported by 93 countries and opposed by 24, with 58 abstaining and 18 not voting.
- The fourth resolution, A/RES/ES-11/4, rejecting the Russian annexations of four Ukrainian territories and calling on the international community to refuse recognition of the same, was supported by 143 countries and opposed by 5, with 35 abstaining and 10 not voting.
- The fifth resolution, A/RES/ES-11/5, recommending the creation of a documentary record pertaining to the damage and losses suffered by Ukraine due to Russian wrongful acts in support of future reparations to be paid by Russia, was supported by 94 countries and opposed by 14, with 73 abstaining and 12 not voting.
- The sixth resolution, A/RES/ES-11/6, demanding a cessation of military operations and a complete withdrawal from Ukraine by Russia, along with other demands arising from the UN Charter toward the creation of a “comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine,” was supported by 141 countries and opposed by 7, with 32 abstaining and 13 not voting.¹²

On balance, the voting record in the UNGA suggests that all six resolutions condemning Russian behavior in different ways were supported by substantial majorities. Barring the two resolutions that pertained to suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council and the preparations for securing Russian reparations respectively, all the other motions were routinely supported by some 140-odd countries. The states consistently in opposition to all

the resolutions were a small coterie of Russian allies. These nations were joined, however, by more member states when the issues of Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council and preparing for reparations came up for votes—something that can be explained both by the specifics of these two resolutions and the fears about possible impacts on the dissenting states themselves.

But what is striking is that a significant number of countries—between 32 and 38—chose to abstain from condemning Russia more or less regularly across all six resolutions, and some 10 to 18 countries did not vote at all depending on the issue in question. In other words, a rough quarter of the UNGA's membership chose not to support the West's efforts to rebuke Russia for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Most of the prominent abstaining countries are included in what is today often—and admittedly problematically—called the “Global South,”¹³ with Algeria, China, India, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, South Africa, and Vietnam among the more prominent. Many of these states, being postcolonial entities in different ways, are usually deeply concerned about threats to national sovereignty. As such, their conspicuous reluctance to condemn what to most in the West is flagrant Russian aggression seems perplexing, at least in the first instance.

More importantly, however, the voting record on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the UNGA does not fully clarify the extent of the current cleavages in the international system. The record of votes is a useful but still incomplete indicator about the anxieties many states have about the current international order, which is viewed as insufficiently responsive to their national aspirations. Thus, although large majorities voted to condemn Russia because it had brazenly crossed an unacceptable line—invading a neighboring state—the disquiet within significant parts of the international community about Western hypocrisy toward violations of sovereignty, the perceived indifference of the Global North toward development challenges in the South, and the imbalances in international representation at the high table of global governance, all remain persistent issues that have subverted the U.S. effort to secure universal condemnation of Moscow's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

Three Blocs at Odds on Ukraine and Beyond

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strikingly confirmed that the international community is now divided into three groups—what G. John Ikenberry has labelled “Three Worlds”¹⁴—a rupture that has had a specific impact on how Washington and its international counterparts have confronted Moscow during this war.

The first group consists of the United States and its closest allies in Europe and Asia, all relatively developed and powerful states that are fully committed to opposing the Russian invasion and are currently involved in different ways to actively assist Ukraine's war effort. This group of democratic states encompasses the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO) partners in Europe, and Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand in the Asia-Pacific. The collective response of these U.S. partners to the Russian invasion in Ukraine is *balancing*: internally building up their military capabilities to deal with the long-term threats posed by Russia and its de facto confederates as appropriate but, equally, collaborating among themselves and with Ukraine to assist Kyiv in resisting the Russian onslaught through the provision of arms, intelligence, and military training.¹⁵

The second group consists of states that have geopolitical affinities with Russia and are generally opposed to the West because they perceive themselves as targets of hostile Western policies—more specifically, hostile U.S.-led Western policies—on a range of issues from strategic competition to human rights. This group includes China and Iran, which even as they have formally abstained from condemning Russia in the UNGA, have effectively expressed solidarity with Moscow as a fellow victim of aggressive U.S. policies. China has supported Russia with diplomatic endorsement, economic assistance, and a variety of militarily-relevant technologies,¹⁶ while Iran assists Russia militarily through sales of combat equipment,¹⁷ which has been used with devastating effect in the Ukraine war.

Other members in this group include the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The first of these is a militarily capable state and today enjoys significant independence from both Moscow and Beijing but is now an active supporter of the Russian war effort because of, among other things, its bitterness about U.S. opposition to its nuclear weapons program and its ambition to unify the Korean peninsula through force.¹⁸ The others, in contrast, are either largely Russian clients or have affinities to Moscow that are transparent, even if they have abstained or did not vote on the various UNGA resolutions condemning Russia. As such, the behavior of this group is functionally *bandwagoning*: whether through tangible actions or merely rhetorical support, they have made common cause with Russia against the West, supporting Moscow’s war against Kyiv as a vehicle for their myriad grievances against the wider liberal international order led by the United States.

The third group consists of a large and diverse number of states that are functionally “nonaligned” and whose behavior is marked by a calculus that spans active opportunism to passive neutralism. In general, this group includes many of the 30-odd states that have consistently abstained and many of the 10-odd states that have usually not voted on the six UNGA resolutions pertaining to the Ukraine war. It strikingly includes India, which as a result of its neutrality, has effectively supported Russia’s war by both Delhi’s conspicuous refusal to condemn Putin directly and its largescale purchases of discounted Russian oil, which end up subsidizing Moscow’s war effort and sustaining its initially rattled economy—even as New Delhi has forged close relations with Washington because of their common problems with Beijing.¹⁹

The foreign policy of Türkiye, a U.S. ally and NATO member, remains another startling example of similar strategic opportunism: although Ankara supported all six UNGA resolutions condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine, it is engaged in a careful balancing

act that seeks to avert a Russian conquest of Ukraine while simultaneously protecting its relations with the West (which provides markets and technology), Russia (which provides raw materials and energy), and China (which provides markets and investments).²⁰

Indonesia, South Africa, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Kazakhstan are also other examples of states in this category. While perhaps not as overtly opportunistic as India and Türkiye, each has complex but valuable relations with Russia and with China as well. They seek to protect these ties, even if they are not enthused by Putin's actions in Ukraine (as evidenced by Indonesia, which voted against Russia on several UNGA resolutions). But they are also not entirely persuaded by the Western argument that Russia's invasion must be condemned without reference to the prior history of NATO's geographic expansion and as such they seem willing, at least privately, to give Moscow's fears about the contraction of its geopolitical buffer much greater credence than is acceptable within the U.S. government and its allied partners.

In general, the behavior of this third group represents a form of *distancing*: a desire to stay aloof of the conflict by avoiding both a manifest opposition to Russia and an explicit embrace of Moscow. Because this group is large and diverse, how this balance is sustained varies in the case of each individual country, with some actively taking advantage of the conflict to advance their own interests while others are attempting merely to avoid the backwash of the larger global rivalry spilling on to them.

What is striking about this group, however, is that it includes states that have both voted against Russia as well as those that have abstained or not voted against Moscow on the various UNGA resolutions. In sheer numbers, it represents the largest of the three blocs currently present in the international system. As such, the voting patterns in the UNGA do not do justice to its presence because the overwhelming condemnation of Russia on Ukraine does not reflect the larger ambivalence that exists about both the U.S.-led democratic West and the "axis of resistance" encompassing the various states determined to oppose American hegemony for geostrategic or ideological reasons.

For all its significance, the threefold cleavage that the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought to the fore cannot be considered a structural attribute of the international system. It does not describe the systemic distribution of power or polarity as conventionally understood.²¹ The membership of at least two of the blocs—those opposed to the United States and its partners and those seeking to escape the rivalry between the West and its opponents—could fluctuate depending on how their external environment mutates, their governing regimes change over time, and the specific issues confronting them in their encounters with American (and allied) power alter in salience.

As such, they represent a congeries of self-regarding states rather than real coalitions: their presence in a particular grouping is the result of the intersection of their current ideology and interests and, while they may cooperate with other states that are similarly positioned on some issues, these groups do not represent a coherent confederacy with a common agenda beyond their discomfort—in varying degrees—with U.S. power and the global order sustained by

America's ideals and its strength. The U.S.-led coalition is more enduring in contrast, although exceptions exist on the margins (or could arise—in important ways to be identified later) even here. Consequently, the currently existing blocs must be treated not as features of the “deep structure”²² of international politics but only as manifestations of its persistent processes insofar as they represent mainly “bargaining behavior within a [given] power structure.”²³

This behavior is shaped, to begin with, by differing visions of international order. The first vision, while accommodating power, emphasizes respect for the choices of democratic countries and is rooted in a liberal understanding of politics both within and outside states. The second vision emphasizes the primacy of security and the prerogatives of power and is rooted in a more forthrightly realist conception of international politics. And the third vision accepts elements from both the previous frameworks but, being sensitive to power inequalities between states, seeks to preserve a sanctuary wherein weaker nations can escape both foreign pressures in their internal affairs as well as competitive rivalries among the great powers.

In the final analysis, however, these ideational differences intersect with the concrete national interests of any given state—irrespective of its relative power—and, therefore, the “membership” of any state in one international grouping or another depends on how its conceptions about international order interact with its material circumstances.

Colliding Visions of Order

When the ideational level is considered, the three different visions of order flagged above appear to be at least in tension, if not in outright collision. The dominant vision of international order in the West is rooted in liberal internationalism. This worldview recognizes states as the most important actors in the international system but views their security-seeking activities, though important and primary, as embedded in a larger environment defined by international society. The presence of both entities—national states and international society—then justifies the view of the international system as being a “society of states.”²⁴

This society of states is most stable when its constituent order-producing entities are governed by consent. The resulting peacefulness within them carries over outside their boundaries because the normative and structural features that prevent violent conflict within states ineluctably shape their foreign conduct as well. This theoretically makes a society composed of liberal states naturally peaceful: it recognizes that some defensive instruments may be necessary to protect security but bolsters the larger tranquility by fostering productive international activities such as trade. Because trade creates a web of prosperity, it also generates disincentives for conflict. War in this vision is thus averted because the constituent states are well-ordered domestically and their security-seeking is embedded in a cooperative quest for expanding prosperity both within and across national boundaries.²⁵

Since liberalism recognizes that international society is not always composed of democratic states, peaceful international relations requires either the expansion of democracy abroad or the acceptance of certain minimal rules of international conduct by all parties, such as eschewing aggression and conquest, a norm that would in practice also be reinforced by the preservation of a balance of power, especially between liberal and nonliberal states.²⁶ As a consequence, peace could remain the “natural” condition among states, with war the atypical aberration.

Since the end of World War II, this vision of international society has nurtured European integration with U.S. support. It led to the creation of pan-European institutions, such as NATO, designed to contain Soviet military power. The liberal project in Europe, accordingly, was nurtured within the cradle of American power and represents an outcome produced by U.S. hegemony: it incorporated the realist judgment that preserving security and prosperity in the transatlantic universe required maintaining peace between old European rivals but more importantly a balance of power between the new Kantian “pacific federation” established in Western Europe and its external rivals,²⁷ namely the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe. The presence of superior U.S. power in multiple dimensions—economic, technological, and military—thus created a liberal oasis in Western Europe, laid the institutional foundations for the eventual expansion of a liberal international order, and underwrote what came to be known as the strategy of containment. The success of this effort during the Cold War not only prevented conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but also engendered deeper European integration through multiple organizations that ultimately produced the EU in 1993, which made economic management, foreign policy harmonization, and democratic consolidation all integral elements of the European project.

After the Cold War, both NATO and the EU progressively expanded to include many of the states that were previously under Soviet domination. This enlargement proceeded on the assumption that its liberal premises ensured that the expanding European community could not pose, almost by definition, a threat to any country outside its fold. The pacific federation would protect itself against attacks by external authoritarian enemies; it would also engage in peaceful democracy promotion to mitigate exactly such threats, but it would not engage in any *unprovoked* wars against nondemocratic states.²⁸ These premises logically justified NATO and EU expansion in the post–Cold War era—but with caution. Although the transatlantic alliance was convinced about its own peaceful intentions, there was an awareness about how the enlargement of these Western institutions would upset the Russian Federation. But these concerns were ultimately set aside because many of the former Soviet-controlled states desperately wanted an affiliation with the West to preserve their continued independence and return to prosperity. The impetus for NATO and EU expansion, accordingly, was driven not by Washington’s or Western Europe’s desires for a larger membership—despite their belief in the innate peacefulness of the endeavor—but rather by the demand of the Eastern European states, such as Czechia, Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic countries, seeking to escape their historic fate of “being at the receiving end of Russian imperialism.”²⁹

When Ukraine, which shares a border with Russia, sought NATO and EU membership, Russia—because of both its own history and its existence outside of liberal Europe—grew increasingly anxious, especially after the February 2014 “Revolution of Dignity” in Kyiv, about

the geopolitical dangers that might be posed to its security. The precise nature of these threats is admittedly ambiguous but fears of “democratic contagion”³⁰ posing a threat to the authoritarian Russian regime as well as the prospect of confronting unfavorable “power differentials”³¹ in proximity to the Russian homeland arguably constituted good reasons for concern in Moscow. As a result of the Cold War, Russia had long nurtured a jaundiced view of NATO as a security threat, viewing it as an extension of U.S. hegemonic power directed against itself rather than as the defensive instrument it actually was in the face of postwar Soviet expansionism, especially in Europe.³²

This perception has also been colored by the reality that the United States *is* a Janus-faced state: it is undoubtedly liberal in that it upholds rule by consent domestically and promotes the same abroad, but it is simultaneously a tenacious practitioner of realpolitik that uses force whenever required to protect its security and that of its democratic allies as well as its global primacy, which enables it to propagate its ideals and defeat the threats to the international system that serves its interests.³³ As a liberal hegemon, it cannot do otherwise even if in the process it incites the animosity of others and their efforts to resist its power. These countervailing responses can at best be mitigated but never eradicated because American power advantages—even apart from its behavior—will invariably prove disconcerting to its rivals.

Unlike the Europe encompassed by NATO and the EU, which is self-consciously liberal in its domestic and international politics—despite some recent exceptions where force has been employed offensively as part of the controversial “responsibility to protect”³⁴—and the United States, which is a hybrid entity that is liberal in its domestic politics and its international ambitions but as a hegemonic power is also compelled to often wield its power abroad in accordance with realist dictates, Russia is and has been for most of its history the embodiment of thorough and undiluted realpolitik. To be sure, many countries outside the pacific federation of Western liberal democracies conform to the Russian pattern but, in the contemporary international system, Russia and China stand out as great powers that have assimilated *macht*politik in both their domestic political management as well as their foreign policy. As such, they have consciously sought to maintain their distance from the liberal universe while profiting whenever possible from it.

Although Russia flirted with liberal politics for a brief period after the Cold War, that experiment petered out conclusively with the rise of Vladimir Putin. At any rate, Moscow today does not view the Kantian troika of rule by consent, common moral bonds, and economic interdependence as sufficing to mitigate the threats it perceives to itself.

The Russian political experience, in fact, has been marked by the absence of democracy for extended periods even in its modern history. Because, as the historian Igor Torbakov has noted, “Russian history is best understood as the process of adaptation to (relative) backwardness and perceived external threats,”³⁵ it is not surprising that successive rulers in Moscow before and including Putin sought to create an authoritarian garrison state to cope with real and imagined threats both inside and outside the country.

Furthermore, contemporary Russia has a complicated relationship with Western culture, exalting a specific strand of traditionalism over the opposing transatlantic current of expanding individual liberties. As Andrey Makarychev has pointed out, the West's cosmopolitan vision of openness is derided as "weakness and decadence," which is perceived to arise from "abandoning its cultural roots and betraying traditional European (Christian) values in favor of a false multiculturalism."³⁶

Finally, rather than viewing trade as an instrument for mutual prosperity, Russia is now completely inclined toward securitized commerce, seeking both protection and leverage vis-à-vis its partners, as a result of its deepening conflicts with the West. Although Moscow entered the post-Cold War era with a "deep, if somewhat distorted, integration with the global economy,"³⁷ the increasing Western sanctions provoked by Putin's aggressions even before, but most conspicuously after, 2022 have compelled Russia to rely on partners mainly outside the West. This has now resulted, in Richard Connolly's words, in a renewed "emphasis on self-reliance in the name of security, with economic policy subsumed within a wider concern to insulate Russia from a growing array of external threats."³⁸

The ideational gulf between Russian *realpolitik* and Western liberalism in regard to international order is thus quite stark. Moscow's vision of international order is centered fundamentally on the primacy of security-seeking states. Although other elements, such as norms, organizations, and institutions, exist in the international system, states have effective centrality and when push comes to shove cannot be constrained by liberal values such as peaceful conflict resolution or the compulsions of prosperity. The natural condition of the international system, in Russia's experience, has thus always been "the inevitability of conflict."³⁹ Because security is scarce in international politics (and is just as scarce domestically as well), Moscow today has sought to immunize itself by erecting a sturdy authoritarianism at home while maintaining large military forces—to include a formidable nuclear arsenal—and seeking a controlling influence over its neighbors.⁴⁰

The dominant Russian approach to neutralizing external security threats over its long history has in fact centered on imperialism, understood as power over the sovereignty (or national choices) of other political entities along its periphery.⁴¹ While political control over others may be viewed in Moscow as essential to security, Russian imperialism is also deeply linked to its self-image as a great power, its peculiar "imperial nationalism,"⁴² and its rulers' ambitions to build a strong centralized state and consolidate their authority at home.⁴³ If such motivations are assumed to be enduring, Russia's assertiveness at any given point then hinges largely on its internal state capacity and its military capabilities relative to its neighbors, which have waxed and waned over time. As many observers have pointed out, the new spurt in aggressive Russian behavior under Putin, for example, has been underwritten by the reconstitution of a sturdy personalized leadership in Moscow, increasing energy revenues, and rehabilitated military power.⁴⁴ Despite this revitalization however, Russia presently lacks the capabilities to reintegrate the entirety of its former Soviet-era empire. Consequently, Russian imperialism for now will be oriented toward a select set of states.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of Russia's current imperial turn—after the loss of its European empire in 1991—is its geopolitical obsession with “Eurasia,” which has been imagined as “a great inland continent . . . a separate space, carved and hemmed between Europe and Asia,”⁴⁵ and within which lies the prize—Ukraine. The conception of “total and unfettered control” over Ukraine has been described by the most prominent ideologue of Russian imperialism presently, Aleksandr Dugin, as “the absolute imperative of Russian geopolitics on the Black Sea coast,”⁴⁶ and is intrinsically linked to the larger project of resisting the West's efforts to transform Russia into a regional power and away from its perceived true destiny “as an Empire.”⁴⁷ As Dugin has argued, accepting regional status would be “tantamount to suicide for the Russian nation”⁴⁸ because the loss of empire “for Russians means the end and failure of their participation in civilization, the defeat of their spiritual and cultural system of values, the fall of their universalist and messianic aspirations, the devaluation and debunking of the entire national ideology that animated many generations of the Russian people and gave strength and energy for exploits, creation, struggle and overcoming adversity.”⁴⁹

As Charles Clover has documented, these convictions, however hyperbolically expressed by individuals such as Dugin, drive Vladimir Putin's ambition to dominate Eurasia as part of “a deniable but clear goal: to remake the Russian Empire in all but name.”⁵⁰ This mission has been vitalized by his belief that Russia was humiliated by the West after the end of the Cold War, having been forced into accepting arrangements that were against its interests—which must now be corrected. In Putin's view, Russia's unique cultural identity as the “chief defender of Christianity and faith in God”⁵¹ in the face of the Western retreat from traditional religiosity makes it the natural locus of resistance to liberalism and serves as an instrument for mobilizing those forces in the West that are opposed to the current transformations occurring within their own countries.

All these elements appear to be fused in Russia's current objective of consolidating its great power status: this aim steers it immediately toward seeking varied forms of control in its near abroad in order to procure enhanced security. Moscow today frames this task self-servingly as one of defending the entire “Russian world,”⁵² which includes many Slavic states as well as Russian minorities in various borderland countries. The “strategic realism”⁵³ of this pursuit unfortunately has produced repeated security threats, at varying levels of intensity, being levied at its neighbors and beyond. Consequently, while Moscow desires cooperation with others that serve its interests, it has not relinquished the view that interstate competition, understood either as active violence or the perpetual preparation for it, is the norm in international politics and, as such, justifies its demand for a privileged sphere of influence along its borders.

With such premises, it is not surprising that Russia has viewed NATO's post-Cold War expansion in entirely zero-sum terms. When the smaller countries of Eastern Europe—Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—and the three erstwhile Soviet republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—joined the U.S.-led military alliance, Moscow's anxieties, however elevated, were kept in check. But the dam burst when NATO under pressure from then president George W. Bush contemplated its expansion to eventually include Ukraine and Georgia.⁵⁴ Russia's visceral reaction to Ukraine and Georgia's membership derived, in the case

of the former, partly from the fact that Ukraine and especially Kyiv lie “at the very heart of the origin myth of the Russian nation and civilization,”⁵⁵ since the Kievan Rus—the medieval East Slavic state from where Russia originated—was established in what is now Ukrainian territory. This fact underlies Putin’s adamant contention that “Russians and Ukrainians were one people—a single whole,” essentially sharing “the same historical and spiritual place,” whose current separation is therefore a “great common misfortune and tragedy” that must be corrected.⁵⁶

But it is equally the reaction of an imperial power to the new agency demonstrated by a subordinate state. Because Ukraine is a large country adjacent to Russia and views its own history as being shaped alternatively by periods of existence inside and outside of Europe (as well as sometimes “with” Europe and “for” Europe), the relationship with Russia is increasingly conceived in terms of resistance to Moscow rather than in symbiosis with it, as many Russians, including Putin, would want to believe.⁵⁷ This contrary understanding, which underlies the process of nation building witnessed elsewhere in the world and which now transcends the various prewar social divisions within Ukraine, however challenges both Russia’s civilizational ethos and its imperial ambitions. Consequently, Kyiv’s desire for freedom from Moscow through a new and durable strategic affiliation with the West appears provocative to the Kremlin especially given the current Russian desire to discriminatorily recreate the empire it lost in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Given Ukraine’s importance to multiple Russian interests, Moscow had offered proposals throughout the 1990s—ever since Boris Yeltsin’s presidency—that attempted to secure, as the Helsinki Accords phrased it, the “indivisibility of security in Europe.”⁵⁸ These Russian efforts were intended to prevent NATO from expanding closer to its borders and underscored its view that the expansion of Western security (to include that of the former Soviet-controlled states) should not come at the price of increasing Russian insecurity. Obviously, these plans were premised on the assumption that Russian priorities, epitomized by its desire for a veto over its neighbors’ security arrangements, should take precedence over their own national preferences. At the end of the day, where Ukraine was concerned, the ideas proffered by Moscow failed to persuade both Washington and its European partners because the conflicts between the Western goal of enlarging the European pacific federation, Kyiv’s aim of consolidating Ukrainian geopolitical autonomy, and the Kremlin’s desire for a substantial buffer zone consisting of key subordinated states could not be reconciled. As a result, the West ended up betwixt and between: it left open the possibility that Ukraine could secure membership in both NATO and the EU at some point in the future and, thereby, produced an outcome that proved sufficient to provoke Moscow without providing any effective protection to Kyiv.⁵⁹

That Russia under Putin has sought to foreclose this possibility conclusively through war demonstrates how the liberal and realist conceptions of international order have collided in Ukraine.⁶⁰ The liberal internationalism of the West views the expansion of the institutions within its pacific union as inherently peaceful. It represents the good intentions of expanding the democratic peace and exemplifies a fortiori the freedom of choice that all states have—and which democratic states especially have because they are governed by consent—in choosing

whom they want to affiliate with. This freedom to choose is the essence of state autonomy and represents an important attribute of sovereignty in the international system.⁶¹ However, the realist inheritance of the Russian vision, which is intensified by arguably more phony fears of threats to its identity, culture, and influence, do not permit Moscow to perceive these possibilities benignly. Rather, they are assessed primarily through the prism of power and competition, and because security in its many dimensions is scarce in international politics, they are judged as permanently altering the Eurasian balance of power in ways that fundamentally undermine Russian security, which is conceived as requiring primacy in the Eurasian space through the selective reconstitution of the empire that Moscow lost after the Cold War even if that entails a new confrontation with the West.⁶²

If Russia was a weak state as it once was after 1991, it might have had to live with these discomfiting possibilities. But because it is no longer as infirm, it has used its military power—however ineptly as it has done during this campaign—to attempt eliminating the threat posed by the possibility of NATO appearing at its doorstep. In so doing, it has underlined the realist roots, albeit qualified by cultural elements and Putin’s own personality, of its competing vision of international order.

Realist scholars are, accordingly, correct when they point to NATO expansion as an important factor that shaped Russia’s decision to finally invade Ukraine.⁶³ But it is all the same an incomplete explanation.⁶⁴

For starters, Ukraine’s membership in NATO was nowhere on the cards when Putin made his fateful choice for war. The question of Ukrainian membership in NATO has animated European security debates ever since the Bucharest summit in 2008, and Moscow’s decision to invade in 2022—some fourteen years after membership was first proposed—does not square with any notion of an imminent threat to Russian interests. Even if it were not imminent, whether an eventually enlarged NATO that included Ukraine would pose a serious threat to Russia is contestable because, when examined beyond the abstractions, the conspicuous deficiencies in the alliance’s offensive combat power (coupled with Moscow’s significant conventional and nuclear forces) ensure that the dangers it posed to Russia would be more notional than real. All the same, Putin dismissed entirely the frantic French and German efforts at offering to freeze Ukraine’s quest for NATO membership as a means of reassuring Russia and averting its February 2022 invasion.⁶⁵ This suggests that the fear of a further NATO expansion at some indefinite point in the future was a less compelling reason for war than the broader conviction shared by most Russians, and by Putin in particular, that the reconstitution of control over specific Russian borderlands remains the only enduring guarantee of its security.⁶⁶

On balance, therefore, whatever the contextual drivers may have been, the “efficient cause” of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is Putin himself—and this is true in more than just a trivial sense. While his fears about Western power coming closer to his doorstep can be understood, his decision for war seems driven ultimately by his distinctive desire to penalize Ukraine’s rejection of subordination to Russia as part of rebuilding Moscow’s domination over important

states along its peripheries. Maintaining such an empire has been an enduring obsession in Russian history and is sometimes justified as being similar to the efforts of other great powers, the United States included, to preserve buffer zones surrounding their homelands wherein they enjoyed preponderant influence, occasionally to the point of control.⁶⁷

Whether this claim about Russia's desire to control its near abroad is comparable to that of other great powers throughout history is true or not, it is certainly a view that finds supporters outside of Moscow. Many countries beyond the liberal West believe that the Ukraine crisis cannot be properly judged, politically and morally, without admitting to at least the inadvertent consequences of the West's desire to expand the pacific union in Europe. In their judgment, threatening a great power's interest in controlling its borderlands made the Ukraine war inevitable.⁶⁸

Both strong and weak Russian allies in the axis of resistance have levied this charge transparently. Thus, for example, China, the most powerful of Russia's partners today, in unison with Moscow declared that it "oppose[s] further enlargement of NATO and call[ed] on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches," while admonishing the U.S.-led West "to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States."⁶⁹ Even a weak state like Cuba, perhaps Russia's oldest ally among the countries now opposed to the West, made NATO expansion the pivot of its support for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine when it declared that "the determination of the United States to impose the progressive expansion of NATO towards the borders of the Russian Federation constitutes a threat to the national security of this country and to regional and international peace. . . . We call on the United States and NATO to seriously and realistically address the well-founded claims for security guarantees of the Russian Federation, which has the right to defend itself."⁷⁰ Other Russian allies such as Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have offered similar defenses of Moscow's aggression, in essence agreeing with Pyongyang's contention that "the root cause of the Ukraine crisis totally lies in the hegemonic policy of the U.S. and the West, which enforce themselves in high-handedness and abuse of power against other countries."⁷¹ Not surprisingly, all the more capable states in this anti-Western grouping—China, North Korea, and Iran—also have a vision of international order that, just like Russia, demands special respect for their own efforts at controlling their peripheries.

Although the myriad assertions that call out NATO expansion as the sole cause of the current war in Ukraine without any reference to Russia's imperial conception of security are commonplace within the axis of resistance, they have also found sympathy among the nonaligned states in the international system. The most prominent example here has been South Africa whose president, Cyril Ramaphosa, plainly declared in its parliament that "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."⁷² Even India, which has carefully refrained from officially supporting this view, accepts its substance for the most part. Thus, for example, a distinguished former Indian

foreign secretary, Kanwal Sibal, voiced such perceptions when he argued that “the West chose to take full advantage of Russia’s weakness to revitalize and steadily expand NATO eastwards despite the promise not to extend it beyond East Germany after German reunification, isolate Russia from Europe in tandem with the eastwards expansion of [the] EU too, with Ukraine’s entry into NATO and EU [becoming simply] the coup de grâce against Russian security.”⁷³

Even when the nonaligned states are dismayed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, they are thus sympathetic to at least Moscow’s fears of a heightened threat, even though few countries, if any, would buy into Putin’s allegation that Ukraine is not a legitimate and independent entity because it “has never had stable traditions of real statehood.”⁷⁴

In any event, the eruption of the Ukraine war and the U.S. effort to garner universal condemnation of Russia’s invasion has resulted in many countries in the Global South seeking to opt out of what they perceive as a return to new forms of charged rivalries. Unlike the West’s postwar liberal internationalism and Russia’s current culture-inflected realism, those that have sought to remain neutral in this crisis have not articulated a clear statement of an alternative vision of order. They obviously value elements of the liberal project such as the global trading system and the benefits offered by various multilateral organizations. But as postcolonial states for the most part, they dislike the intrusiveness of the great powers in matters of their domestic politics, a problem that is especially acute for nondemocratic or imperfectly democratic countries. Thanks to their histories, however, they are also conscious of the realities of power: while they all seek to protect their security and autonomy in different ways, they recognize that structural inequalities exist in international politics and great powers therefore should not be provoked unnecessarily.

All the same, most of the nonaligned states of the Global South have been unified by three specific concerns.⁷⁵ First, they are animated by what is viewed as the hypocrisy of the West, given its own past violations of sovereignty, such as in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Although the specifics in each case differ—and even though each of these interventions can be defended albeit uneasily—they are often concatenated in the consciousness of many nations, which then invariably produces a moral equivalence between the West and Russia where great-power military intervention is concerned.⁷⁶ Because most postcolonial states value their newfound independence above all else, they prize the Westphalian rather than the evolving version of the liberal international order. The former affirmed the formal equality of all states and exalted the norm of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of other countries.⁷⁷ The liberal international order traditionally conformed to this Westphalian vision—preferring to encourage positive change abroad through example and through political and economic assistance rather than through military force.

After the Cold War however, alarmed by the external consequences of state failure and operating amid the permissive conditions created by unchallenged U.S. hegemony, liberal powers tentatively began to advance the argument that the right to noninterference was contingent on a state’s ability to discharge its obligations both to its own citizens and to the international system at large. Failing to discharge these obligations may warrant forcible

external intervention.⁷⁸ This evolution, underlying many of the West's interventions in Europe and the Middle East after the Cold War ended, was intended to preserve a well-ordered global system, not destroy it. But it inevitably created resentments on the part of weaker states and those nations whose interests were undermined by these interventions. In time, it would buttress Putin's justification for his own invasion of Ukraine but, equally problematically, would provide credence to the more specious claims that his aggression was not particularly different from other examples of Western intervention in recent years.⁷⁹

Second, the nonaligned powers are alarmed by the pain inflicted by the food and energy disruptions created by the Russian invasion and the other travails arising from the U.S.-led sanctions regime that followed. Although all nations have been affected by these developments in some way, the poorest states have borne the hardest brunt.⁸⁰ This leads to their all-too-justified fear that global resources will now be ploughed, once again, into geopolitical competition. Chief among these concerns are the damaging consequences for the larger development agenda at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the global inequality of wealth and climate change promises to inflict disproportionate pain on developing countries. As a consequence, the poorer states have placed a "greater focus on [the war's] disruptive effect on their economies and the consequent need to restore stability, rather than concern with [its] territorial and human rights violations. The immediacy of the painful economic spillover of conflict [has] translated into a position that support[s] a cessation of the war, even if that—as some in the West [have] argued—would play into the hands of Putin."⁸¹

Third, many developing countries are alienated by the failures of global governance institutions, which because of the inequalities in representation, are judged to be unresponsive to their needs. Whether it be the deadlock in UN Security Council caused by competing veto-wielding interests, the paralysis of the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement process, or the inability of the Bretton Woods institutions to finance development activities on the scale required, these disappointments are attributed quickly and sometimes unfairly to the inequity in representation in these bodies. This has encouraged growing support in the Global South for new alternatives—such as the BRICS group, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative—as well as calls for the reform of the UN Security Council, which only promises further contestation and possibly paralysis.

This dissatisfaction with the existing system, however, has not translated into any real alternative to the liberal international order as an organizing framework for world politics. The old intellectual construct of nonalignment still survives but has lost the animating force it once enjoyed as a movement during the Cold War. To the degree that there is any replacement that unifies the Global South today, it is represented by the new shibboleth of "strategic autonomy" in the context of a rising demand for "polycentrism"⁸²—an old Indian idea that dates back to the high tide of the Cold War—which is often colloquially and mistakenly referred to by the term "multipolarity."

The notion of strategic autonomy, inherent in the logic of “active non-alignment” (ANA), is viewed as the most effective response on the part of the weaker states to the conflictual conditions of the present time. As Jorge Taiana summarized it, “the ANA privileges the national interest [of the subaltern state] and does not subordinate it to the interest of any [other great] power. It is not about keeping equidistance in polarized situations. It is about evaluating each decision according to how . . . sustainable development with social justice is strengthened. The ANA is not a defensive nor a passive option. It seeks to modify a reality that is not favorable to developing countries. It also provides a link with a group of countries that are increasingly relevant every day, in [Latin America] as well as in Asia and in Africa. And it is a policy that understands that the contingencies of the present do not prevent [these states] from staying the course toward a better future.”⁸³

A negative element of resistance to the great powers is thus baked into the idea of strategic autonomy. As Jorge Heine summarized it, states in the developing world must “not accept *a priori* the positions of any of the Great Powers in conflict. They must act, instead, in defense of their own national interest, without giving in to pressures from hegemonic powers.”⁸⁴ But there is a positive element as well. This consists of a demand for recognition, where the preferences of a multiplicity of states are accorded due consideration, even if they are *not* as powerful as the weightiest actors in the international system.

This idea originally underlay the concept of a polycentric world order as developed by one of its early articulators, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, in India. As Singh described it, a polycentric system is one “characterized by a number of centers of power trying to achieve a balance of interests rather than the classical balance of power.” Each of the “key players acting as the more capable centers of power” has varying strengths, which are “not necessarily symmetrical in their various components—economic, technological, political and military—or even complete in all elements.”⁸⁵ Yet they ought to be accommodated as rule-makers by the more powerful states in their own interest if conflicts within the international system are to be avoided.

This effort to give weaker states a voice is a direct challenge both to the realist conception of order—which makes relative power (and its reflection in systemic polarity) the sole condition for recognizing great power status—as well as to the liberal international order insofar as it is challenged to live up to “the principles of egalitarian, meritocratic justice on which its legitimacy is premised.”⁸⁶ Whether the liberal international order actually incorporates such a claim for its justification is another matter, but the desire for a polycentric international system clearly represents an attempt to construct a “pluralist” world order where the poles are not recognized on the basis of aggregate strength alone and where the most powerful nations do not dictate the rules of international interactions.

The demand for polycentricity is thus an effort to denude relative power of its centrality in international politics and, toward that end, the term “multipolarity” is often misused by leaders in the developing world to justify their desire to be taken seriously. To be sure, the countries they represent are not true poles in the conventional sense of the term but merely

centers of varying influence, each of which possesses differing degrees of autonomy. Yet what is really being contested when statesmen from emerging countries claim “the growth of a multipolar order”⁸⁷ is the traditional idea that great powers have the sole privilege of defining the “rules of the game” in an international system that is becoming increasingly fractured, multilayered, and cross-cutting.⁸⁸

Obviously, multipolarity will not come to define international politics merely because a few rising—but far from risen—powers assert its existence. But they can make their presence felt in the interim by declining to support, which would provide legitimacy to, the claims made by the competing blocs in the international system—as the nonaligned states have done in the Ukraine war. Through both its negative and positive elements, the Global South is thus seeking to escape the pressures of the new emerging competition between the West and Russia (or China), while carving out space to assert its own interests, even as it utilizes the institutions and benefices offered by both sides in the overarching rivalry.

Competing National Interests

The Ukraine war has brought to the fore three distinctive ideational streams, but these frameworks do not, by themselves, suffice to position any given nation in either the balancing, bandwagoning, or distancing bloc. Whether a state ends up in one particular group or the other depends on how its vision of global order intersects with its national interests, which are in turn a composite outcome of six variables: (i) regime type; (ii) leadership choices; (iii) physical proximity to the conflict; (iv) ties to the belligerents; (v) stakes in the outcome; and (vi) benefits and costs accruing to the country. The interaction of these variables, insofar as they pertain to the Ukraine war, shapes how states conceive of their national interests in the conflict and, accordingly, positions them in one of the three groupings against the backdrop of what is still a U.S.-dominated international order.

The states that make up the U.S.-led coalition balancing against Russia in the Ukraine conflict are distinguished most conspicuously by their regime type—an attribute shared also by the bandwagoning bloc that is opposed to the West. All the states that actively support Kyiv in its defense against Russian aggression are democracies. Even the most conspicuous dissident in the coalition, Hungary led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, is nominally a parliamentary democracy. The threat posed by an authoritarian regime like Russia is an important animating element for most of the European partners and the United States: protecting their democracies is a fundamental element of their national interest and binds the balancing coalition together.

This unity derives from their conviction that Russian actions in Ukraine do not threaten just the security of the transatlantic liberal federation (or the security of the individual states therein), but the integrity of their political regimes as well—a judgment springing from the evidence of insidious Russian actions against democracy in Europe and the United States in

recent years.⁸⁹ Defeating the Russian aggression in Ukraine, consequently, may not eliminate its threats to Western democracy. But a failure to resist that eases Moscow's path to victory will almost certainly intensify the dangers Russia poses to their political freedoms.

Because confronting Moscow in the face of long-standing energy dependence served as an inhibiting factor early on for many European countries, the brave decisions taken by political leaders, such as Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Boris Johnson and now Rishi Sunak in the United Kingdom, Olaf Scholz in Germany, Mark Rutte in the Netherlands, and even Andrzej Duda in Poland—to cite only a few cases—were crucial to resisting Russia at a time when their countries, among other regional states, were highly dependent on Russia for energy imports and their populations were particularly vulnerable to economic dislocation.⁹⁰ The recognition of the threat posed by Russia's invasion to European security induced many of the continent's leaders to accept the painful costs of resistance and rally their electorates to that cause—spurred partly by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's unexpectedly stirring leadership—when the alternative of appeasing Russia because of their energy dependence could not have been conclusively ruled out.

The importance of leadership choices is also demonstrated by an exception that tests the rule: Hungary's Victor Orbán, in contrast, repeatedly frustrated European efforts early on at supporting Ukraine militarily and expanding NATO. Whether this posture was driven by his desire to keep Russian energy flowing into Hungary in the face of its deep economic dependence on Moscow, or his personal desire to preserve friendly ties with Putin, or was merely a consequence of his “ego and his . . . political narcissism,”⁹¹ Orbán proved that leadership choices can, on occasion, resist even the legacies of history, which would otherwise place Hungary as a strong supporter of Ukraine because of its past subjugation by Russia. Even here, however, leadership influence mattered because it was only the pressure exerted, and blandishments offered, by his European peers that finally persuaded Orbán to finally support the EU aid package to Ukraine when assistance to Kyiv hung in the balance because of political disputes in the U.S. Congress about financially supporting Ukraine.⁹²

At the end of the day, however, President Joe Biden remains the most striking exemplar of leadership courage when support to Ukraine is concerned. At a time when American politics is deeply divided, when the Republican Party has walked away from its postwar tradition of upholding U.S. preeminence in the world and resisting naked aggression by states that do not wish the United States well, and when there is disquiet within his own Democratic Party about the costs of supporting an open-ended conflict in Ukraine, Biden has led the transatlantic community in resisting the Russian aggression. This stewardship has been demonstrated most vividly by his administration's commitment to discharging the obligations of enlightened hegemony, which led the United States—despite its conscious efforts at avoiding any undue provocation of Russia—to become the largest single national provider of aid to Ukraine, outstripping by some distance the contributions of every other U.S. ally.⁹³

For all the effects of personalities, however, a nation's stakes in the outcome of the war and its proximity to the conflict bear heavily on its decision to balance against Russia. On these counts, almost all the European partners of the United States recognize that Russian aggression, if unpunished, threatens their collective security as well as their individual safety and autonomy. An expansion of Russian territory that includes Ukraine (or a victory that brings just partial control permanently) brings Moscow's power closer to NATO's frontiers and could animate new attempts to intimidate the Baltic states, Poland, and other nations in East and Central Europe as part of Putin's ambitions to restore the lost Russian empire. These dangers threaten U.S. interests directly because of its Article 5 obligations to defend NATO allies, but even beyond the transatlantic commitments of collective defense, a meaningful Russian success in the Ukraine war dangerously upends the U.S. vision of a stable order in not just Europe, but globally.⁹⁴

Because the United States is a global hegemon, its physical distance from the Ukraine conflict is irrelevant. Washington is compelled to deal with the threat as if it were next door. But to the European partners, physical proximity to the conflict matters. So, it is not surprising that those states closest to the war—the Eastern European nations formerly controlled by the Soviet Union—are the biggest champions of aiding Ukrainian resistance even if they are by no means the wealthiest countries in Europe, which thanks to geography are protected by NATO's newest members on the front line. The interconnected history of these states and Ukraine, their close political ties with Kyiv, and their sympathy for it as a former Soviet satellite has led to their willingness to accept the high cost of aiding Ukraine. Consequently, these countries—Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia—have thus far allocated among the highest fractions of their gross domestic product (GDP)—anywhere from 4.5 percent to 2.3 percent—toward government support to Ukraine.⁹⁵

The data pertaining to the U.S., European, and Canadian assistance to Ukraine, as well as the support offered by Washington's Asia-Pacific partners, primarily Japan, South Korea, and Australia, corroborates the larger proposition that the Russian invasion represents a dangerous threat not only to the security of the political West as a whole but to the larger liberal order underwritten by the United States—which provides important collective goods for the entire international system. Defeating Russian aggression obviously protects European and transatlantic security immediately, but it also provides demonstration effects that could help ward off future threats potentially mounted by China in East Asia. It could also have a significant effect on the future of the global nonproliferation regime. As such, the Western alliance has high stakes in the outcome of war. Consequently, the national interests of every state in the U.S.-led balancing coalition demand resisting, however asymmetrically, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and because these nations are part of an Olsonian "privileged" group—states that disproportionately enjoy the benefits produced by neutralizing Moscow's threats—it stands to reason that they have contributed most heavily toward achieving this outcome.⁹⁶

The states that have bandwagoned with Russia through support for its actions against Ukraine represent a different conception of national interest: one that centers on resistance to the United States and the international order it upholds through varying forms of solidarity with Moscow. The most striking commonality of all the states that form this axis of resistance is their antipathy to liberal politics. They are all deeply authoritarian regimes ruled by dictators—as is evident in China, North Korea, Eritrea, Syria, and Cuba—even though some of them, such as Belarus, Iran, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, have the semblance of electoral democracies.

While their regime type naturally puts them in opposition to the U.S.-led liberal order, this resistance is amplified by the choices of their leaders. In fact, leaders and their choices matter in autocracies in more direct ways than they do in democracies: in the latter, leaders have to negotiate with both their societies and other arms of the state to formulate policies that must be justified as being anchored in the national interest, whereas in the former leadership preferences ipso facto become state policies and national interests are largely synonymous with the interests of the rulers who more often than not view their hold on domestic power as threatened both by the values espoused by Washington and, equally importantly, its policies toward their nations individually.

Thus, for example, China's Xi Jinping views U.S. efforts to support Taiwan and Washington's creation of a balancing coalition in the Indo-Pacific as a direct threat to both his Communist regime in Beijing and the desire to amalgamate the various foreign territories that China claims as its own.⁹⁷ North Korea's strongman, Kim Jong Un, has similar grievances: he views the United States as his country's "biggest enemy"⁹⁸—the singular obstacle to his totalitarian regime, his dream of reunifying the Korean peninsula under Pyongyang's tutelage, and his ambition to sustain a potent nuclear weapons program. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the theocratic regime he presides over, still views the United States as the "Great Satan," a power that is determined to both prevent Tehran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and contest Iran's claim to regional hegemony through its collaboration with the Jewish state of Israel and its Arab partners such as Saudi Arabia.⁹⁹ Belarus's president, Alexander Lukashenko, who has relied on Moscow for subsidies and political support to sustain his authoritarianism for nearly three decades, initially tried to move away from Russia. But the U.S. opposition to his fraudulent 2020 reelection was deeply threatening to his power and since then, he has allied even more tightly with Russia's Vladimir Putin to the point of allowing Russia to use Belarus's territory to launch its attack on Ukraine even though the population at large does not support the Russian invasion.¹⁰⁰

All four states, accordingly, have become strong supporters of Russia's war against Ukraine in large part because of their problems with the United States.

Thus, although Beijing poses as neutral in the conflict, Xi's "no limits" pact with Putin prior to the war has served as a critical form of geopolitical support for Moscow.¹⁰¹ Mainly because of U.S. pressure, China has refrained from aiding Russia by transferring lethal combat equipment, but it has heavily subsidized Putin's war effort through the export of integrated circuits and combat-relevant manufactured goods, such as ball bearings, trucks, earth moving equipment, and chemicals for weapon propellants as well as through the accelerated imports

of Russian oil.¹⁰² Consequently, Russia has become enormously dependent on China not only for a variety of producer and consumer goods but also for geopolitical support. Although Beijing still tries to avoid alienating the West excessively because of China's dependence on Western markets, it has nonetheless embraced Russia as an ideological partner in the common struggle against American power that is simultaneously intended to bolster authoritarianism at home.¹⁰³

Unlike China, Iran and North Korea have aided Russia's military operations in Ukraine more directly. Tehran has supplied Moscow with large numbers of armed drones, and in exchange, Russia has deepened its collaboration with Iran through the sales of advanced combat aircraft and the development of high leverage dual-use and other critical military technologies.¹⁰⁴ Beyond these specifics, however, the strategic goals of Russian-Iranian cooperation are unified by their larger opposition to U.S. hegemony: both states seek to erode American dominance in the Greater Middle East and to undermine transatlantic cohesion more generally, thus making their common cause on Ukraine a valuable instrument for securing both objectives.¹⁰⁵

In ways similar to Iran, North Korea too has aided the Russian war effort in Ukraine directly by transferring vast quantities of ammunition and short-range missiles.¹⁰⁶ This partnership, again, aids the Russian military campaign at a time when its own defense industrial complex cannot meet the heavy demand for artillery ammunition. In exchange, Russian transfers of food and raw materials for weapons manufacturing to North Korea as well as assistance to its strategic programs help Pyongyang breach the UN sanctions regime and buttress Kim Jong Un's continuing confrontation with the United States.¹⁰⁷

Belarus too has aided the Russian war effort through the simple realities of geography: it permitted Moscow to use its territory, which offers a shorter land route to Kyiv, for military exercises and to stage part of the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰⁸ Russia has also deployed advanced weapons on Belarus's territory, some of which have been employed in combat actions against Ukraine, and has more recently stationed tactical nuclear weapons in the western part of the country.¹⁰⁹ Despite such a close partnership based largely on Lukashenko's reliance on Putin for political support, Belarus's support for the Russian war is marked by hesitation: Lukashenko has declined to contribute troops to Putin's war effort despite the Kremlin's pressure and his ambivalence in this instance—which is unique among the states in the axis of resistance—is because his despotic government faces substantial opposition from civil society within the country.¹¹⁰

The other countries that have bandwagoned with Russia—Eritrea, Syria, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—have supported Moscow primarily through diplomatic and symbolic instruments. These are largely weak states whose sympathy for Russia is driven by their individual histories of confrontation with the United States but intensified by the personal grievances of their leaders, which has led to a strong embrace of Moscow. Thus, for example, Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea's dictator holds the United States and its allies responsible for siding with Ethiopia in the 1998 war that resulted in his country's humiliating defeat.¹¹¹ Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was saved entirely by Russia's assistance since the 2011 civil war in his country, thus making his commitment to Vladimir Putin both personal and political.¹¹²

Similarly, Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan ties with Russia are long-standing and are intimately linked to the Russian support for their authoritarian regimes over the years—in the case of Cuba, dating back to the Cold War.¹¹³ In all three cases, the old grievances about U.S. policy toward their governing regimes, past or continuing Russian assistance, and the desire to be seen as independent of the United States despite being located in the Western hemisphere has helped sustain support for Moscow, but variably in each case. In every instance, what the ruling autocrats value most is their control over power at home. Because Moscow has historically been sympathetic to this cause, support from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela for Russia's invasion comes easily. But they contribute little materially to Putin's war effort, although in Cuba's case, a few hundred Cubans appear to have privately joined the war on Russia's side—lured by money.¹¹⁴ Moscow continues to offer modest assistance to all three states, which seems sufficient to preserve their endorsement of Putin's war.

All the countries represented in the group of bandwagoning states, thus, have different but distinctive stakes in the outcome of the Ukraine war: although they have no physical proximity to the combat zone (with the exception of Belarus) and, as such, are not directly threatened in a way that the European allies of the United States are, they do not wish to see Russia, their strategic partner, defeated by Western power at a time when their links to Moscow are important for success in their own confrontations with the United States. Because the latter can be existential for these countries, close ties with Russia, and sometimes among themselves, are essential for their survival (or least, the survival of their ruling regimes). This is especially true for Belarus' president Alexander Lukashenko. Furthermore, the close ties that the anti-Western states nurture with Moscow are in striking contrast to their tenuous links with Kyiv (even if there is nascent support among the populations in some of these states for Ukraine). Because the extant dictators, however, judge that the costs of a Russian defeat to each of them individually is significant, having an impact both on their countries and regimes, their support for Russia over Ukraine becomes a logical outcome of their perceived national interests. Where they vary most conspicuously is in their capabilities and so the strongest among them—China, Iran, North Korea, and less obviously Belarus—see their aims advanced by tangibly assisting Moscow in this war, while the weaker can only profess verbal or token support from the sidelines.

The positions taken by the countries in the third group of states on the Ukraine war—those remaining nonaligned in different degrees—are also shaped significantly, yet unsurprisingly, by their material interests. It is difficult to summarize how these interests intersect with the worldviews of each of these nations because their number is large, and they are remarkably diverse as far as their regime types are concerned. But if India, South Africa, Indonesia, Türkiye, and Kazakhstan are taken as representatives in this category, they span the gamut from nominally electoral autocracies such as Kazakhstan to transforming democracies such as India and South Africa to shallow democracies such as Türkiye and Indonesia. Although genuinely liberal democracies with competing power centers and unconstrained civil societies also exist in this grouping, many of the most influential states are marked by the presence of charismatic politicians at the helm who exercise outsize influence over their countries' choices:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye, and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former president of Kazakhstan who still seems to yield influence in his country's politics, remain good examples.

With the exception of Türkiye, none of these countries is located in close proximity to Ukraine. Consequently, they do not ordinarily have pressing equities in the war's outcome even though they have all suffered in different ways, with some like India even benefiting from its disruptions. Obviously, they do not wish to see Ukraine, a sovereign state, annexed through Russian force of arms, but because this outcome is now improbable—largely because of Ukrainian tenacity buttressed by Western assistance to Kyiv—they have been freed to pursue their own ambitions in ways that do not put them at stark odds with either the West or Russia. In fact, their ties with both Russia and Ukraine, however asymmetrical, allow them to engage both sides in ways that advance their own interests.

India remains a good example of such maneuvering. New Delhi has had long-standing ties with Moscow dating back to the Cold War. It has historically viewed Russia as a special protector of its interests, especially in the UN Security Council, and was traditionally a major customer of Russian military equipment. Beyond these legacy links, however, India still views Russia as a great power and as a critical element of the multipolar order that India hopes will one day replace U.S. hegemony globally.¹¹⁵ The Ukraine war has undoubtedly put India's special relationship with Russia to the test. Despite its discomfiture with Putin's invasion—because of the blatant violation of sovereignty it represents—New Delhi has assiduously avoided criticizing Russia openly to prevent Moscow and Beijing growing closer when Sino-Indian relations are increasingly strained. Moreover, India does not want risk the close ties it still enjoys with the Russian defense-industrial complex.

As a consequence, whatever its discomfort with Putin's aggression may be, “India will not join the Western attempt to isolate and weaken Russia, it will keep being committed to its relationship with Moscow.”¹¹⁶ In this regard, it has gambled—correctly—that Washington will overlook these linkages, as well as the lifeline that India has thrown to Moscow through its increased purchases of Russian oil, because of the U.S. interest in collaborating with India against China. As a distinguished Indian analyst, C. Raja Mohan, summarized it, “Far from being in an unenviable bind, New Delhi now looks well placed to leverage its position in the middle for its own benefit in the short and long term.”¹¹⁷ New Delhi has thus been able to protect its ties with Russia and the United States simultaneously. It has also extended modest support to Ukraine concurrently by offering it humanitarian aid, and in a more intriguing recent twist, appears to be covertly negotiating a sale of artillery shells to Germany for onward transfer to Ukraine.¹¹⁸ Thus, even as India weakly appeals to Putin to end his war, it continues to make the dichotomous investments necessary to protect the benefits accruing to itself across the board.¹¹⁹

South Africa and Indonesia are other examples of countries that have chosen to walk a fine line between Russia and the West in an attempt to protect their specific interests. Pretoria's sympathies for Moscow can be traced to the African National Congress' (ANC) links to the

then-Soviet Union during the apartheid era, when it provided the liberation movement—the precursor of the current government—with financial and political support as well as arms. South Africa today appears to have reciprocated that support—shaped largely by the ANC’s leadership preferences—even though South Africa’s economic and cultural links with Russia are minimal.¹²⁰ All the same, lucrative economic linkages between South African businesses and shadowy Russian financiers and the Kremlin persist, with Russia making conspicuous attempts at “state capture” along the way.¹²¹

Against this backdrop, the persistent South African criticism of the United States in the Ukraine war is as striking as its futile effort at negotiating peace between Russia and Ukraine, despite its lack of effective leverage (or even influence) with both sides. Again, the calculation in Pretoria seems to be that its ambition to play a larger role in representing Africa on the global stage is better advanced by compelling U.S. attention to its ability to maneuver between the rivals than simply satisfying Washington by an open condemnation of Russia.¹²² Because the United States is increasingly sensitive to the concerns of the Global South in the context of its own rivalries with Russia and China, South Africa’s determination to avoid taking “a very adversarial stance against Russia”¹²³ is judged by Cyril Ramaphosa’s regime as promising greater benefits than costs to South Africa.

Indonesia has mimicked South Africa in similar ways. Although Jakarta has suffered economically as a result of the war given its dependence on Ukraine for wheat and on Russia for fertilizer, Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo has seemed determined to avoid getting trapped in the emerging cleavages between Russia and the West.¹²⁴ Widodo’s early statements refused to call Russia out as the aggressor by name, instead asking “all parties” to stop the conflict. This ambiguity reflected the strikingly pronounced public support for Russia within Indonesian society—a stance that has been judged to derive from the widespread perceptions of Russia as a challenger to Western hegemony, as a friendly great power that has been sympathetic to Indonesian interests historically (presumably in contrast to China), and Russia’s effective disinformation campaigns globally. These considerations coalesced to paint Putin’s war in Ukraine as a justified response to Western provocations in the form of NATO expansion.¹²⁵

Faced with such social sentiments, Indonesia’s government, drawing from its standing tradition of nonalignment and complementing similar efforts by Brazil, Türkiye, and South Africa, attempted to engineer an end to the Ukraine conflict. This effort by Widodo obviously failed, but it did serve to secure Russian commitments to deliver food and fertilizers to Indonesia. Indonesia’s Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto subsequently offered another surprise peace plan that centered on the creation of a demilitarized zone and a UN referendum “to ascertain objectively the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants of the various disputed areas.”¹²⁶ None of these initiatives can satisfy either Ukraine or its Western supporters because they serve to legitimize Russia’s invasion. But they do reflect Jakarta’s deep desire to escape a conflict that is viewed as creating nothing but inconveniences for bystanders like Indonesia. The imperative of protecting Jakarta’s ties to the belligerents has thus provoked a strategy centered on tepidly offering peace proposals from a distance, while prioritizing the benefits accruing to Indonesia over and above the desire to penalize an aggressor that is both viewed as a friend and located very far away.¹²⁷

Türkiye and Kazakhstan also represent similar strategies where the pursuit of self-interest is concerned. Türkiye is an especially interesting case because it has been a longtime, and in the past a staunch, NATO member. Yet after the Ukraine war began, Ankara declared both the West and Russia to be “equally”¹²⁸ reliable. It has engaged both Kyiv and Moscow simultaneously to the point of selling armed drones to the former, keeping the Turkish straits closed to all warships, and facilitating Ukraine’s wheat shipments abroad, while also intensely engaging with Putin for reasons related to both geopolitics and energy, with perhaps some sympathy for a country that has also lost an empire.¹²⁹ Türkiye’s maneuvering between the two blocs has been shaped greatly by Erdoğan’s own political astuteness (as well as his dismay about Türkiye’s past treatment by the EU), which has led to a strategy that condemns Russia’s belligerence on the one hand but seeks to avoid “imperiling Turkey’s close relationship with Moscow or upsetting Turkey’s business opportunities with Europe”¹³⁰ on the other hand.

Ankara’s approach to the Ukraine conflict is striking because its policies have deviated conspicuously from NATO and EU preferences. For a long time, it dragged its feet on supporting Sweden’s entry into the alliance, but it has also asserted that Ukraine deserves NATO membership after the war. Because of Türkiye’s physical proximity to the conflict, Ankara dreads the prospect of a decisive Russian victory in Ukraine and its military assistance to Kyiv and offers to host peace talks are aimed at precluding that outcome. But it also seems unwilling to invest in decisively defeating Russia. Consequently, it has refused to implement tough sanctions against Moscow. Erdoğan as well has used his relationship with Putin to offer Russia diverse lifelines through the purchase of energy, increased tourism, and growing merchandise trade, which also benefits the troubled Turkish economy. This has led one scholar to conclude that Ankara’s real objective is “a long, inconclusive war in Ukraine.”¹³¹ Even if Erdoğan’s goals are more charitable, his ambidextrous engagement of the warring parties certainly suggests that he has elevated the ambition of making Türkiye a pivotal player in the conflict resolution process above all else: his desire to preserve Türkiye’s relations with the West (and Europe particularly) without alienating Russia (and China) excessively, then positions him to wield influence way beyond its immediate borders—thus making Türkiye another example of how the Ukraine war may actually advance specific national interests.

Kazakhstan represents another fascinating instance of how states that have practiced distancing have maneuvered between the West and Russia. Despite being an authoritarian state that has close ties with Moscow—and was in fact part of the former Soviet Union—Kazakhstan has carefully avoided endorsing the Russian invasion of Ukraine as Belarus, for example, has done. Almaty’s abstention record in the various UNGA votes actually obscures its dismay with Russia’s aggression because of its fears that Moscow’s revanchist success in Ukraine might increase the threats to its own independence.¹³² The fears are intensified by the history of Russian colonialism in Kazakhstan and the devastating Soviet-era famines in the country.¹³³ As such, Kazakhstan has important stakes in the outcome of the war despite not being physically proximate to the conflict. Not surprisingly, Kazakhstan has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, has repeatedly called for an end to the conflict, and has even offered its services as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine.¹³⁴

Despite efforts to distance itself from Russia's invasion, Kazakhstan is nonetheless substantially dependent on Russia, even for its internal security. Although the details are murky, Almaty relied on Russian-dominated military alliance forces to quell internal unrest within the country in early 2022.¹³⁵ Furthermore, its extensive borders with Russia, the authoritarian character of its regime, the presence of a large Russian-speaking population in Kazakhstan, and its substantial economic ties with Russia, naturally make the leadership sensitive about Moscow, despite the strong sympathies for Ukraine's victimization, especially among younger Kazakhs.¹³⁶ The net result of these cross-cutting currents is that Kazakhstan has chosen to avoid an open confrontation with Russia while at the same time refusing either to accept the Russian justification for its invasion or recognize its annexation of various Ukrainian provinces. Even as it maintains a close relationship with Russia, Kazakhstan seeks to diversify its ties with other states, including China and various European partners, in order to diminish Moscow's stranglehold.¹³⁷ Until this process matures, however, Almaty sees its interests in protecting its independence and prosperity best served by preserving its ties with Russia but without endorsing its misconduct.

The observed behaviors of the myriad nations in the nonaligned group—which intersect in many cases with the Global South—thus confirms an intense desire to avoid becoming trapped in the ongoing rivalry between the U.S.-led liberal bloc and the authoritarian powers that resist it.¹³⁸ The states that have chosen to distance themselves from this rivalry obviously have benefitted from many of the institutions created as a product of U.S. hegemony in the postwar era. But because they believe that their benefits have not yet been sufficient for them, they have often demanded a reform of the existing system. Many of the larger and more capable countries in this grouping also have substantial international ambitions of their own—ambitions that are better advanced by exploiting the cleavages between the U.S.-dominated bloc and its antagonists rather than allying with one or the other. For the most part, these countries are physically located far from the conflict zone. And while they recognize the dangers of aggressive wars for international security, these concerns about world order do not affect their particular interests in ways that compel them to take sides. Their complex neutrality on the Ukraine war, then, does not necessarily represent a lack of sympathy for Kyiv's victimization by Moscow, but rather a determination to advance their own interests over and above the aims pursued by the combatants and their supporters.

Implications for the United States

The Ukraine war brought the recessed cleavages in the global system to the fore, but it did not cause them. These fractures are an inevitable consequence of the decades of global hegemony enjoyed by the United States. This hegemony—understood as a singular concentration of power that underwrites systemic leadership—has a long history. It first burst upon the international arena after the American Civil War, but its presence was felt only gradually as the United States entered the rivalries of the European state system during the first half of the twentieth century.

U.S. hegemony created its most enduring imprint during the postwar period although it was obscured for a while by the Cold War. This veiling under bipolarity, however, did not alter the fact that the Soviet Union was never a genuine peer of the United States, except in military prowess, because even at its peak in 1975, Soviet GDP never exceeded 58 percent of the U.S. product.¹³⁹ As such, the “comprehensive national power” of the United States—to use a Chinese term of art—was much greater than that of the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War if GDP is treated as a working proxy for international power.

When this power is considered in its expansive sense, as the composite product of economic strength, technological dominance, military capability, geopolitical influence (to include alliances), institutional weight, and ideational attractiveness, the real hegemony of the United States in global politics is seen in true relief.¹⁴⁰ The post–Cold War period clarified this reality strikingly. It is possible that in years to come, the rise of China will produce a new return to bipolarity but, on current trends, it is most likely that such a condition will manifest itself as “asymmetrical bipolarity”¹⁴¹ because China’s growing economic size may not be matched by other achievements, such as technological supremacy, globe-girding military capabilities, alliance partnerships, rule-making influence in international institutions, or attraction in soft power.¹⁴²

Therefore, despite the rising crescendo of claims about the arrival of multipolarity, unipolarity, centered on U.S. hegemony, defines the current structure of the international system.¹⁴³ This unipolarity does not permit the United States to always get its way on all matters of international politics nor does it guarantee immunity to occasional (even conspicuous) failures—this has been perpetually true even in previous historical episodes of systemic dominance—but it does imply that America’s rivals, however rising, do not yet match it in regard to their national capabilities when these are assessed across-the-board.

The extraordinary dominance of American power, then, provokes resistance by those states that fear both its effects and its policies. American power, by itself, is substantial enough to unnerve rivals that have ambitions that potentially collide with American goals. And its core policies, centered on the promotion of liberal politics globally, can amplify these fears if they undermine either their authoritarian governance domestically or their interests in different issue areas. There is no escape from this natural competitiveness which defines the primary cleavage in the international system. Any exit from this condition would require that the United States either diminish its national power or cease to promote liberalism internationally so as to assuage the anxieties of its rivals, neither of which it can do: the former, because it cannot willingly weaken itself; the latter, because it cannot consciously betray its national character. Alternatively, an escape from this competition would require America’s competitors to give up on their own interests in the face of Washington’s power, something that cannot be expected either.

As long as the global system is thus cleaved between the United States and its challengers, international politics will be marked by a persistent fracture that pits Washington and its allies—those that share its liberal politics and its interests and benefit from its protection—against

states that are opposed to them, and which may share varying degrees of mutual affinity. This contestation also opens the door to other states who seek either to take advantage of this rivalry to secure benefits from one or both sides (if their support is judged to be valuable to the main protagonists) or to escape the larger rivalry altogether to avoid being inadvertently crushed by it. The presence of such bystanders too is an inexorable consequence of the structural competition occurring between the principal contenders and their partners.

Given that the Ukraine war has now clarified the extent and the depth of these cleavages, the United States should neither be surprised nor deterred by them. Rather, it should resolutely pursue its own interests in the circumstances. Above all, this means that Washington should not desist from continuing to invest in the maintenance and expansion of the liberal international order. Doing so is not optional, nor is it, as is sometimes believed in the United States, a gratuitous act of charity. On the contrary, it is fundamentally necessary to preserve the global order that protects U.S. interests and enhances its prosperity—both of which bolster America’s continued hegemony.

Thanks to the investments Washington made during the postwar era, the pacific federation of countries allied with the United States in different ways already constitutes the largest concentration of material power in the global system. The 2022 data from the World Bank reveal that the NATO alliance together with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand command slightly more than 55 percent of global GDP. If the share of the global product accruing from the EU, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States is totaled, the figure is somewhat smaller but still close to 50 percent. Either way, the “strategic West”—the area of the world that is at peace within itself and contains Washington’s strongest supporters in international politics—towers above the competitors to the liberal order. The ten states in the axis of resistance for example—Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela—produce less than 21 percent of the global product, and the myriad other countries in the rest of the world combine to produce slightly less than 30 percent of the global total.¹⁴⁴

Protecting the constituents in the most productive segment of the global economy then makes the U.S. investments entailed utterly worthwhile because they safeguard the large pool of resources available to underwrite both collective defense and the expansion of the liberal international order while enabling the expansion of trade between all the partners, which contributes toward the expansion of their national wealth. All these goals combine to increase U.S. security and its prosperity, while simultaneously serving to legitimize America’s global dominance. To the degree that the liberal order’s institutions also serve the interests of the nonaligned world and even some U.S. adversaries, they only enhance what Susan Strange once called the “structural power”¹⁴⁵ of the United States and, by implication, increase the robustness of its domination.

Guarding the liberal international order thus brings both direct and indirect benefits to U.S. hegemony. If nothing else, the fact that it keeps half, or more than half, of the world’s material resources “on side” makes it a remarkably good investment for a hegemonic power.

To the degree that this order also provides collective goods for the global system writ large and thereby strengthens the international acceptance of U.S. power—something Antonio Gramsci understood to be the most important ingredient for weakening resistance in the face of striking power asymmetries—Washington’s investments are doubly useful. Consequently, the now frequent allegations in the United States about their superfluousness, dispensability, irrelevance, or unacceptability miss the significant benefits they bring in terms of the pacification they promote, the prosperity they engender, and the resources they offer for the advancement of American interests.

Because the effort to protect—and expand—the pacific federation of democratic states internationally will require the United States to employ military power—often, but not always, for its own protection and the defense of its allies—Washington will also be susceptible to charges of hypocrisy and double standards. Occasionally, there may even be merit to such complaints. But as long as the international system is rivalrous, the United States will have to employ force whenever that is demanded by its interests. Most such applications of force would usually be directed at nonliberal states.¹⁴⁶ This too is to be expected because the United States, as a hegemonic power, is tasked with the unique responsibility of protecting the liberal order, which is otherwise embedded in a wider, conflictual, system and therefore must be defended by force of arms against its adversaries. Consequently, Washington must not be unduly deterred by critiques about its supposed duplicity. Although it should—and, as the representative of a liberal state, always will—attempt to accord “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,”¹⁴⁷ the exercise of its power, when necessary, cannot be constrained by the complaints of others.

Where protecting the liberal order is concerned, the most important task facing the United States today is ensuring the defeat of Russian aggression in Ukraine. This will require leading by example as it has already done: providing Kyiv with the military and financial assistance necessary to ensure that it can recover its lost territories and by so doing signal the West’s resistance to any efforts at changing international borders through force. Defeating Russia’s aggression in this way is an investment in protecting European security—an objective that is intrinsically valuable to the United States—given that NATO countries produce close to a quarter of the world’s economic product and the U.S.-European economic relationship still remains the world’s largest trade interaction.¹⁴⁸ Preventing Moscow from achieving success in Ukraine thus reduces the dangers it could pose to European alliance partners, especially the Baltic and East European states, in light of Putin’s ambition to recreate in bits and pieces the erstwhile Russian Empire.

The resources required for this purpose are significant but not beyond the reach of the United States and its Western allies. The total U.S. spending in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, which came out to over \$5 trillion, dwarfs the \$136 billion or so committed thus far to Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ Both the United States and its other Western partners can do much more given their larger resource base and because the stakes in successfully resisting Russia are just as high, if not higher, than the wars in the Middle East. The notion that supporting Ukraine financially is a bad investment—because the war against Russia is both unwinnable and

prohibitively expensive—unfortunately has many takers in the United States. As Nataliya Bugayova, Frederick W. Kagan, and Kateryna Stepanenko have correctly argued, such arguments provide a glimpse into

the Kremlin's real strategy and only real hope of success. The Kremlin must get the United States to the sidelines, allowing Russia to fight Ukraine in isolation and then proceed to Moscow's next targets, which Russia will also seek to isolate. The Kremlin needs the United States to choose inaction and embrace the false inevitability that Russia will prevail in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's center of gravity is his ability to shape the will and decisions of the West, Ukraine, and Russia itself. *The Russian strategy that matters most, therefore, is not Moscow's warfighting strategy, but rather the Kremlin's strategy to cause us to see the world as it wishes us to see it and make decisions in that Kremlin-generated alternative reality that will allow Russia to win in the real world.*¹⁵⁰

Consequently, it is tragic that many Republicans in the U.S. Congress have resisted U.S. assistance to Ukraine on the grounds of either its affordability or its priority given the competing threat posed by China.

While the U.S. support that must be offered to Ukraine cannot be dismissed as trivial, it is not beyond the reach of an economy whose annual output in goods and services will exceed \$27 trillion this year.¹⁵¹ The European assistance to Ukraine must obviously increase further, but there is no reason why Washington's contributions should falter merely for reasons of partisan divides when defeating Russia's invasion is of vital importance to the U.S. interest in preserving a durable zone of peace in Europe. Consequently, it is gratifying that the U.S. Congress finally passed a long-delayed bill continuing U.S. aid to Ukraine after months of hesitation and recriminations.¹⁵²

The argument about forgoing support to Ukraine in order to meet the challenge of China is not particularly persuasive either. Although all states have to prioritize how they expend their resources, a hegemonic power such as the United States cannot exclude large swaths of the world—especially a critical center of power such as Europe—on the grounds that it has to meet the emerging challenge posed by China. If the United States is to preserve the global preeminence that serves its interests, it must meet the entirety of challenges it faces across diverse frontiers, wherever they may be in the international system.¹⁵³

That implies dealing with the dangers both in the west and the east simultaneously. To the degree that defeating Russia in Ukraine could by demonstration serve to deter similar acts of revisionism that might be contemplated, for instance, by China in Asia, the investments in compellence in Europe will help to strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Although this argument should not be overstated, the United States certainly possesses the resources to deal with the China threat even while aiding Ukraine: that the U.S. defense budget as a share of GDP today is much lower than it has been since the 1980s (not to mention the 1960s) amply confirms this judgment.¹⁵⁴

It is unfortunate that the Biden administration lost the opportunity to aid Ukraine most effectively in the early months of the conflict when its own fears about escalation and a possible war with Russia as well as Western defense industrial constraints prevented Washington from arming Kyiv with the necessary capabilities that might have promised greater success when the initial Russian offensive was disorganized and ineffective. Today, the costs of overcoming the strong Russian defenses on occupied Ukrainian territory have increased, but this fact only justifies additional support for Ukraine both from the United States and the European allies. The strengthening of Western solidarity during the Ukraine conflict has been an impressive achievement, but it must now be focused on meeting Ukraine's demanding challenges ahead.

This is a campaign that will necessarily take time, but the next twelve-to-twenty-four months are likely to be critical to Ukraine's ability to shape the battlefield in ways that could eventually change the tide of the war. Western assistance to Kyiv in myriad forms during this period will therefore be critical if the alternative outcomes of a long-frozen conflict or, worse, more Russian military successes are to be avoided.¹⁵⁵ Even as Ukrainian resistance is thus bolstered, the United States should resist calls for a premature negotiation between Ukraine and Russia that freezes the status quo to Moscow's advantage.

Along the way, the United States must fix the leaky sanctions regime that has enabled Russia to sustain its war effort, engaging both its antagonists and the bystanders who have contributed to keeping Moscow afloat. Persuading states in the axis of resistance will undoubtedly be difficult because their strategic interests largely collide with that of the United States. Convincing the bystanders will not be easy either because of their own independent interests but it may be possible if the United States and its partners can accommodate those concerns that do not undermine the vital interests of the political West.

In any event, engaging the states in both blocs is essential. Although it is analytically convenient to treat these groupings as collectives for purposes of depicting the current cleavages in the global system, it is fatal for U.S. policy to operate on the assumption that their constituents are tightly bound to one another by strong common interests in all issue areas. Because these are largely aggregations of states that have arisen as a response to U.S. power, it is possible to engage many of the more important countries in each bloc with an eye to securing their cooperation on Ukraine (or at least diminishing their resistance to U.S. policies on this issue).

The efforts that the Biden administration made early on with Venezuela are a good example in this regard, even though permanent success did not materialize.¹⁵⁶ The case for continued engagement with key countries such as Türkiye, India, and even China, is compelling in this context because these states, like many others, have complex equities in the Ukraine conflict and important dependencies on Washington, both of which should be exploited to limit their opposition to U.S. policies on Ukraine. There is much to be done on this count and even if the West is not entirely successful because of the durability of the cleavages, it may prove to be worth the effort.

Over the long term, it is possible that the composition of the groups at odds with the West may itself change depending on the evolution of the domestic politics within these countries and their strategic trajectories. But unless these changes affect the most important nations in each category—like Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran in the axis of resistance or Türkiye and India, which have followed their own path—the impact on the global fractures affecting Ukraine are likely to be minimal. In contrast, the most devastating and dramatic transformation that potentially lies over the horizon is one that could occur within the strategic West, ordinarily the most robust bloc in the international system. If the United States were to elect a personality like Donald Trump as its president or for that matter any other individual who is willing to turn back some eighty-odd years of postwar U.S. global leadership, the resulting convulsions in the international order would be far more devastating than the current fractures witnessed over the Ukraine conflict.¹⁵⁷ Only the American electorate can determine the possibilities in this regard and at the time of this writing it is impossible to tell with any certainty how the long-term fate of Ukrainian support, the viability of the liberal international order, and the future of American hegemony will be decided.

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Notes

- 1 For a useful assessment that describes the potent mixture of fear and hubris that drove the U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).
- 2 Daniel H. Joyner, *International Law and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 254-298.
- 3 United Nations, United Nations Charter, Article 2 (4).
- 4 Ingrid (Wuerth) Brunk and Monica Hakimi, “Russia, Ukraine, and the Future World Order,” *American Journal of International Law* 116, no. 4 (2022): 689.
- 5 These quotes are drawn from Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” (speech, The Kremlin, Moscow, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.
- 6 Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” (speech, The Kremlin, Moscow, April 25, 2005), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.
- 7 See Stephen Blank, “Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 4 (Autumn 2022): 53-78; Alexander K. Bollfrass and Stephen Herzog, “The War in Ukraine and Global Nuclear Order,” *Survival* 64, no. 4 (2022): 7–32; and Steven Pifer, “Russia, nuclear threats, and nuclear signaling,” *Brookings Institution*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-nuclear-threats-and-nuclear-signaling/>.
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