

Opinion **Global Insight**

The west is rash to assume the world is on its side over Ukraine

It runs the risk of mistaking a local consensus on Russian aggression for a global one

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The world's ambivalence over the conflict should give US President Joe Biden and European leaders like France's Emmanuel Macron food for thought © Benoit Doppagne/BELGA/dpa

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

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One of the most frequent lines heard in Washington is that Russia is now globally isolated — with China being the key prevaricator. America risks being seduced by its own public relations. The world's reaction to [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) is far more complex than that. Since February 24, the west has been galvanised into showing more unity than it has in years. Yet most of the world is on the sidelines waiting to see which way it goes.

Not for the first time, the west is mistaking its own unity for a global consensus. One misleading measure is at the UN. In the organisation's [last tally](#) earlier this month, 141 of 193 member states condemned Vladimir Putin's blatant violation of international law. But the 35 that abstained account for almost half the world's population. That includes China, India, Vietnam, Iraq and South Africa. If you add those that voted with Russia, it comes to more than half.

Moreover, many of those nominally against Russia are hedging their bets. Saudi Arabia is considering China's request to be paid in yuan for its oil. That would help undercut the power of the dollar. Both [Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates](#) refused to take Joe Biden's calls this month when he wanted them to step-up oil

production — a rare snub to a US president.

Last week the UAE hosted an official visit from Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator, and Putin's close ally, who the US rightly sees as a pariah. One of the UAE's motives for rehabilitating Assad is that Biden is pushing to revive the nuclear deal with the [regionally-dreaded Iran](#) that would release more oil on to the global market. Even Israel, arguably America's closest friend, is keeping an open mind. Its prime minister, Naftali Bennett, who is auditioning as a Russia-Ukraine mediator, has been conspicuously even-handed.

All this may look academic in a few months if Ukraine continues to humiliate Russia and the west can sustain its unity. Everybody loves a winner and the hedging countries would probably tilt back towards the west. The bigger abstainers, such as India, which has quadrupled its oil imports from Russia at a discount compared to this time last year, would adjust their stance, which is causing anguish in Washington. But the world's ambivalence should give Biden and Europe food for thought.

One red flag is the west's habitual tendency to claim moral leadership. This creates three problems. First, it is hypocritical. US public opinion paid little attention to the horrific carnage in Syria, for which Assad is primarily culpable. Though Germany took in 1mn refugees in 2015, most of the rest of the west did not follow suit. Britain and the US admitted fewer than 50,000 Syrians between them. What Russia is doing to Ukraine is barbaric. But there is plenty to go round. Many in the Muslim world, in particular, think America practises double standards. Thousands of civilians died in Iraq and Afghanistan from US munitions, though they were not deliberately targeted (unlike in Ukraine).

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Are you from Ukraine? Do you

A second point is that the west is rash to assume its values are universal. The US this week designated what Myanmar did to its Rohingya minority as genocide. Though Myanmar, unlike Ukraine, is in India's neighbourhood, Narendra Modi, India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, made only token protests. The fact that the Rohingya are Muslim undoubtedly influenced him. India took only a tiny fraction of the refugees. This is in spite of the fact that India, unlike China, is a democracy.

have friends and family in or from Ukraine whose lives have been upended? Or perhaps you're doing something to help those individuals, such as fundraising or housing people in your own homes. We want to hear from you. Tell us via a [short survey](#).

A third is that much of the world resents western sanctions. With the exception of fuel exports to Europe, the west has largely decoupled from Russia in a month. The execution has been astonishing. But it has also reminded others of the west's capacity to punish those with whom it disagrees. In this instance, it is very hard to argue the west is wrong. Putin not only poses a mortal threat to democratic values; he is also extolling the

law of the jungle. No wonder so many small countries condemned Russia at the UN.

The western public's response to Putin's barbarism has been admirable. But it is inevitably selective. The more western governments grasp how large parts of the world see them, the better able they will be to practise effective diplomacy.

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