

Opinion **Geopolitics**

This is the hour of the global south

The war in Ukraine has turbocharged the emergence of a post-unipolar world order

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South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, Russia's Vladimir Putin, India's Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping of China attend the Brics Summit in Brasilia in 2019. The next Brics summit will be held in Durban in August © Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images

Alec Russell YESTERDAY

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When the histories of the war in Ukraine are written, it seems a fair bet that the African mediating mission announced by South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa this week will struggle to make a footnote. Would-be mediators are two-a-penny these days, and anyway South Africa has marked its card as being rather too cosy with Moscow to be a credible interlocutor with Ukraine.

But when the histories of the rise of the post-unipolar world are written, Africa's quixotic mediators may well merit a mention. The idea of six African heads of state criss-crossing the front lines of a European war is not just a telling counterpoint to all those western interventions in Africa over the years, it also underlines the accelerating assertiveness of the countries of the "global south" — and their sense that their hour really may at last have come.

This has been visible in a number of arenas since the old globalised order started to fragment following the financial crisis of 2008. But the war in Ukraine has turbocharged it.

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Many non-western nations have looked on at the west's full-throated support for Ukraine and seen hypocritical powers yet again prioritising their own interests and concerns over the big global issues such as health and climate change. They also sense two major opportunities: to play the US and China off against each other, and, as they see it, a long overdue rewriting of the post-1945 world order.

As with all great would-be revolutionary coalitions, this revamped “non-aligned movement” is a group of vastly different and often competing interests; and some can hardly claim to be neutral. The Brics summit in Durban in August will be a cacophonous showcase for these contradictions. The group consists of two autocracies, Russia and China, two big democracies, Brazil and India (the latter hugely wary of the rise of China) and the host, and junior relation, South Africa. Now over a dozen more countries are interested in joining, including Iran.

Not only does this threaten to unleash the world's most mind-numbing acronym, but the risk, particularly for India and Brazil, is that the Brics would tilt ever more into becoming a China club rather than a non-aligned forum of developing economies.

But even so there are clear common interests and goals: a restructuring of the UN Security Council so it represents the world as it is today; a rethink of the Bretton Woods institutions; a tilt at the dollar as the global reserve currency; a push back at the American-led system of economic sanctions; and more.

These targets may not all be attainable but they are rather more precise than the woolly aims of the original non-aligned movement at its first meeting in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Back then the members represented a minuscule share of the global economy; not so today.

“Then it was a talking shop,” says Michael Power, who for 30 years has studied the rise of the global south, most recently as the Cape Town-based strategist for asset manager Ninety One. “But now they are talking about whether they should start trading with each other with local currencies.”

So what should the west do? Lead by example, finally commit to reforms of the global order and pick its words more carefully. One easy piece of advice to anyone drafting communiqués at the end of this weekend's G7 summit: avoid coinages such as “fence-sitters” and “geopolitical swing states” that currently circulate in Washington. The swing state metaphor — implying “we will focus on you once every four years” — perpetuates the sense of a patronising, if not parochial, imperial power.

“We should talk about a rules-based international system, not the rules-based system,” says a senior western diplomat. “And when we talk of the war it should not

system, says a senior western diplomat. And when we talk of the war it should not just be about European peace but about the type of world we want to live in.”

More concretely, the Biden administration has been building bespoke regional alliances, from I2U2 (diverting as a Bono-inspired grouping would be, this is India, Israel, the UAE and the US), to the Asia-Pacific security Quad of India, Australia, Japan and the US.

China is busily convening too, however. This week Xi Jinping hosted a summit of Central Asian countries — Russia’s backyard — reinforcing the thesis of historian Serhii Plokhy that, far from expanding Moscow’s global heft, the war in Ukraine has accelerated a potential subservience to Beijing.

New world orders are of course easier to declare than realise. In 1991 George HW Bush talked of one. His words resounded hollowly a year later: Bosnia was in flames. And some will find it tricky to steer their new course. South Africa’s clumsy *pas de deux* with Russia is an object lesson in how not to play the non-aligned game. It is lucky that the Biden administration does not seem inclined to penalise it for its erraticism.

But India, Indonesia and others are playing rather well. When the war in Ukraine ends, it will be against the backdrop of a subtler world order than that of February 2022. It will be more complex and probably more dangerous; but for some non-aligned countries it will have more opportunity. And it is here to stay.

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