

The Role of the Global South in the Ukraine Situation—Interview with Professor Richard Gowan

Gabriela Reitz

The following is a transcript of an interview with Richard Gowan conducted on June 6, 2023. Gowan serves as the UN Director at the International Crisis Group and Research Assistant at New York University. The interview discusses the role of the Global South in the war in Ukraine.

Reitz: When discussing the war in Ukraine, there's a lot of conversation around how to address the trend of countries in the Global South either abstaining from elections to condemn Russia or taking Russia's side entirely. And a big reason for these countries not siding with Ukraine is that Ukraine is heavily backed by Western countries which have historically colonized and mistreated countries in the Global South. A common take on addressing these hesitations is that appealing to these anti-colonial perspectives could be what ultimately brings the region to Ukraine's side. President Zelensky can appeal to this perspective by pushing the narrative that, just like countries in the Global South have suffered colonial imperial oppression, Russia is currently oppressing Ukraine. I'd like to begin with this idea and just ask you a few questions about what this would mean.

First, what would it look like for President Zelensky to share this narrative? What role does he play as the president of Ukraine?

Gowan: Well, I think the Ukrainians have already been trying to do more to get non-Western countries on their side, and Zelensky's ability to travel has grown, but remains quite limited. But we've seen other

Ukrainian officials like their foreign minister go on a tour of Africa, and they're really doing a lot of outreach throughout the continent. But the Russians are also doing their outreach, and so there's sort of a contest for hearts and minds. The Ukrainians and their allies have been using this anti-colonial argument since very early in the war. The Biden administration has also talked a lot about the need to fight Russian imperialism. So this sort of language is already there in the discourse from Ukraine and its allies, and we can see that it has some impact. And, there are a lot of African, Asian, and Latin American countries that do support Ukraine, for example in votes at the United Nations. But you're also right that it doesn't seem to be having quite the impact that maybe Kyiv and its allies thought that it would because a lot of countries do seem to be resisting this narrative.

Reitz: In the piece that you wrote for the International Crisis Group,²⁰ published this past March, you discuss these "small moves"—such as the Black Sea Green Initiative—and how African and Asian countries endorse the idea that these moves could gradually open space for more extensive engagement between Russia and Ukraine.

Are there other examples of these "small moves"? Who is responsible for initiating them? Is it Zelensky, the West, or even Russia?

²⁰

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global-ukraine/global-south-and-ukraine-war-un>

Gowan: I mean, we've seen a couple of humanitarian gestures during the course of the war. So for example, the UN and the Red Cross negotiated with Russia to get civilians who were trapped in the siege of Mariupol out of the city last spring. It's not only been the UN that has done this sort of work—Saudi Arabia, for example, has been involved in some prisoner exchanges, and the Emirates as well. And then, of course, you have President [Tayyip] Erdogan of Turkey who, especially in the first part of the war, did seem to have special access to Russia and was able to work with the UN on the Black Sea Rain initiative. So there are a number of non-Western countries who have had limited successes in persuading the Ukrainians and the Russians to come together in addition to the UN. I think, though, that even since February, when I wrote the article you refer to, we have seen a bit of a change in the way that big non-Western countries are approaching the war.

There's sort of been a shift from this very tentative diplomacy, largely around small humanitarian wins, to a series of big non-Western countries saying that it is time for at least a ceasefire, and possibly a full scale peace deal. China has tabled a position paper on peace. The Chinese envoy has toured Moscow, Kyiv, and the European capitals taking soundings. President [Luiz Inacio] Lula [da Silva], in Brazil, has been talking a lot about the need for a new group of nations to negotiate a peace settlement. South Africa and a group of African countries have said they want to be part of negotiating a peace settlement. Indonesia made proposals just last week about a UN peacekeeping force going into Ukraine to try and bring the countries apart.

So we're seeing a lot of these bigger, non-Western players trying a more impactful

approach to ending. That's been a real feature of diplomacy through 2023. We didn't quite see non-Western countries playing that role in the early part of the war.

Reitz: *Would you say that these countries—for example Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who are non-Western but have influence on the global stage—have more ethos in the sphere that Zelensky is trying to rally in his support? And is it even the goal of these countries to achieve a global condemnation of Russia?*

Gowan: What's interesting about all the big non-Western players that have entered this sort of peace game is that they all display some degree of sympathy towards Russia's security concerns and Russia's arguments about how the war started. Look at China, who has always sort of echoed Russia's argument that NATO expansion was a driver of the war. Furthermore, Lula, from Brazil, has repeatedly criticized the NATO countries for, in his view, fueling this war by giving Ukraine arms. We've heard similar arguments from South Africa. As I said, Indonesia just stepped up with a proposal for a UN peacekeeping force in Ukraine. It also said there should be a UN referendum in the Russian occupied territories about whether they should be part of Ukraine or Russia.

So from a Ukrainian perspective, I think a lot of these initiatives are deeply suspect because they appear to be playing into Russia's hands, giving Russia's arguments about the origins of the war and how it ends some credibility. I mean, from the Ukrainian perspective, the idea of having a ceasefire is unacceptable because it would allow Russia to strengthen its grip on the occupied territories.

While I sympathize with the Ukrainian critiques of all these peace plans, it is interesting to try and work out why non-Western countries are, in some sense, buying Russia's narrative. And it's also worth noting that Brazil has consistently condemned Russia's aggression. Indonesia has too. South Africa has sat on the fence more. So, it isn't the case that all these countries are pro-Russia, but they do seem to be trying to take a balanced approach. What are the possible reasons for that? One is that many of their leaders have this deep suspicion of US foreign policy and NATO's activities in a lot of non-Western capitals.

There is also the fact that some of these countries have strong economic ties to Russia, although that isn't always the case. South Africa's economic ties to Russia, for example, are very limited. And I think there's also a fear that if Russia is fundamentally weakened, it could unleash some quite scary scenarios, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. And for a lot of these countries, the challenge now is to put a lid on this war before it escalates to a bigger conflict. And that means that maybe they're willing to sacrifice some of Ukraine's interests for the sake of peace.

Reitz: That relates to a question I have regarding the perspective of the Global South. It's pretty widely known that countries within those regions, specifically countries in sub-Saharan Africa, have economic, developmental, and security ties to Russia. For example, Russia accounted for 39% of Africa's defense imports between 2009 and 2018. They provide a lot of food and fertilizer to the region, more recently President Putin wrote off \$20 billion in debt amongst African countries, which indicates some sort of goodwill between

Russia and countries in sub-Saharan Africa that the West may not like very much.

Given this context, is there any part of supporting Ukraine that would be in the best interest of these countries in the Global South? Or is there just too much at risk for them to completely turn their backs on Russia?

Gowan: I think if you look at African views of Russia, you see different factors are at play. And for some African leaders, especially the older generation who were involved in anti-colonial struggles, there's a sort of romantic vision of Moscow as an ally from the liberation movements of the 1970's and 1980's. That vision, I think, is too deep seated to shake. I don't think there's any point in trying to unpick that narrative. And, you asked at the start about using the language of decolonization in support of Ukraine. My sense is that it does have some resonance when Zelensky uses it. The problem is, we've also heard people like Macron from France, and British politicians using similar language. And as soon as you start to hear the old colonial powers claiming that they're on the side of an anti-colonial movement, it's almost inevitably going to get a skeptical response from countries that were on the wrong end of colonialism. So that's part of the mix.

The other part of the mix that you were talking about is that countries just have much more concrete and immediate reasons to side with Russia. Moscow has started to play a big role in fighting insurgencies in countries like Mali and the Central African Republic through the Wagner group. Moscow has sort of allied itself diplomatically with governments that have been under pressure in countries like Ethiopia. These countries do have solid political reasons to, at a

minimum, try and avoid criticizing Russia too much.

I think part of the answer is that western countries have directed lots of aid, and try to be good humanitarians in Africa in particular, in recent decades. And Western diplomats often say they feel that the amount of aid they have offered is unfairly overlooked. But, the reality is that the politics of the continent is changing. You have not merely Russia, but also China playing a vast role in Africa now. And a lot of African governments feel that the US and Europeans take notice of them when they want their support over Ukraine, but that they are not treating African countries' concerns as a real priority. It's all quite tokenistic. What could you do to address that? Well, western countries do have the ability, if they were determined about it, to play a greater role in areas like agricultural trade in Africa. We could agree that we've got to shift the rules of international institutions like the IMF and World Bank to give developing countries a greater say in how they're run. We could invest more in security parts of Africa where governments are turning to Wagner.

The question is, at a time when we're very much focused on other priorities, not the least supporting Ukraine itself, it's not clear to me that there's really a political desire to make all of those investments going forward.

Reitz: You use the word investment, suggesting it's more of a long term thing.

Given the strong presence Russia has in Africa, is there an argument to be made that President Zelensky and the West should spend more time appealing to countries in Latin America and Asia where they have relatively more support?

Gowan: If you look at the track record of how countries from different regions have treated the war, it is clear that Ukraine enjoys a stronger base of support in Latin America. People like President Boric from Chile have spoken out on the war in extremely uncompromising terms, condemning Russia. But, those condemnations come with caveats, and one of the caveats is that for many Latin American countries, it's essential to frame their response to the situation in terms of international law. We see this from Mexicans, for example, at the UN. They've always been very clear that they will speak in defense of Ukraine's right to sovereignty and territorial integrity because that is rooted in the UN Charter, and they have made it very clear that they do not want to be seen as necessarily endorsing NATO policy. And to some extent you just have to accept that countries are going to offer support to Ukraine in their own way.

One complaint I do hear from diplomats, even from countries that are fairly consistent in support of Ukraine, is that they are being affected by the US sanctions on Russia-- those sanctions ripple out into global trade. The countries that feel these effects don't feel they're being consulted about the way Western sanctions on Russia may have unintended secondary consequences for economies elsewhere. And actually, that point about sanctions is one that I think is something that we should be listening to a lot more sensitively.

Reitz: So it's the West's goal to get a unanimous condemnation of Russia, and that's what Zelensky wants as well. But you mentioned in the piece you published this year that it is the events on the battlefield that are shaping the course of the war, impervious to the UN papers and the speeches that are given.

In this case, what would a unanimous condemnation of Russia even mean? Is it worth putting all these resources towards convincing these countries to vote against Russia if what's happening in Ukraine is going to happen regardless? What do these votes mean, in the case of a physical war?

Gowan: That's a very good question and I understand that even Zelensky himself, as the war has gone on, has started to be quite dismissive of these UN votes. They wanted the UN votes early on. One of the things to understand is that, the Ukrainians at the beginning of the war, felt they were, to some extent, in a position similar to that of the Palestinians. They feared that they would lose on the battlefield, so they turned to the UN because they wanted diplomatic support and legitimacy. More than a year later, the Ukrainians feel a lot more confident about their position on the battlefield. And so, statements of support from the UN do not matter to them as much.

Secondly, I think there was a big hold in the first six months of the war that while it might take time, it would be possible to get some of the really hefty non-Western players finally to come round to Ukraine's side. Everyone understood that China was always going to be a reach, although there was a big effort by the US last summer to get the Chinese to at least condemn the idea of nuclear use in Ukraine, which the Chinese eventually did. But, I think there was a hope they could get India, in particular, on board.

After repeated efforts and repeated votes in the UN, a lot of Western diplomats have concluded that those countries are never going to come around. And, to be frank, if you're in the US, while it would be nice to have India on your

side over Ukraine, it's more important to have India on your side in efforts to contain China. Your priority is really sort of working with the Indians in China rather than Russia. So I think people have realized that we're never going to get to a full global condemnation of Russia, except in the scenario where Russia uses a nuclear weapon. But that isn't a scenario anyone wants to think about.

I think the way people are starting to look at the initiatives from places like Brazil and so forth is less about condemning Russia, and more about what happens if Ukraine launches a reasonably successful counter offensive. What happens if Putin finally concludes that it is in his interest to talk peace? I mean, Putin is going to want to do that in a way that saves face. And so when it comes to the crunch, maybe it would be easier for Putin to go into peace talks managed by Brazil and China, rather than peace talks managed by the US. That would be easier for Putin politically.

What's interesting is that people like Secretary of State Antony Blinken have been quite frank that they don't think that it is time for a ceasefire. They don't think that a lot of these non-Western peace plans are going to work out in the near future. But in all those speeches, the US and others have kept open the idea that maybe these peace initiatives could be useful down the road. Zelensky himself made a point of being surprisingly complimentary about the fact that China was coming with a peace proposal, even though it's a peace proposal that doesn't match what Ukraine wants. And so, we're seeing a lot of Ukraine's friends wanting to keep these non-Western countries on board. Less because of the condemnation of Russia, but more because they realize that if you ever want to get an off ramp out of the conflict, you

may need these countries there to essentially help Russia out of the mess that it's created.

Reitz: Ok. That makes sense. And I think that that aligns with what you said earlier, that countries are going to be so suspicious if France and the UK are fully backing these efforts given their histories of colonization. To wrap up this conversation, do you have any last remarks?

Gowan: What I'd say is, we naturally want other countries to support our vision of what's going on in Ukraine. But I think the lesson that we've all learned is that individual, non-Western countries, just like individual Western countries, have a very complex mix of national interests and national needs, and they don't want to be sucked into an old school, Cold War style block politics. They want to have space to maneuver and follow their interests. I think commentaries that have come out over the last years saying

that countries in the Global South not condemning Russia proves that they don't support the West, is just evidence of a reductionist thinking which is not uncommon. It's easier to sort of think of the world in terms of a few blocks and a few big powers, and judge every country by where it sits on the spectrum between the US and Russia or the US and China. But if that's how you see the world, then that's an incredibly bad way of understanding the complex sets of factors that motivate countries to form. We're all talking about the Global South because it's a helpful shorthand to describe the sense that African, Asian and Latin American countries are expressing their political priorities with a sense of urgency. But I think everyone knows that there's a danger in getting trapped in the short hand.